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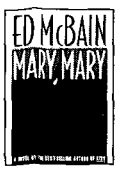

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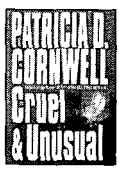

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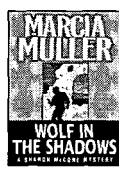

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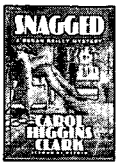

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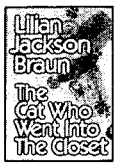

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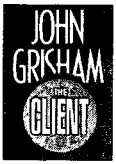

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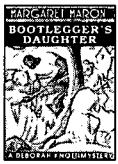

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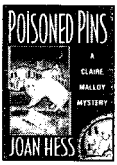

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a *NEW* short story by

KATE WILHELM

Long recognized as a master of the science fiction and fantasy genres, Kate Wilhelm has been proving herself equally skilled at the mystery in recent years with such novels as Seven Kinds of Death *(St. Martin's Press, 1992) and* Justice for Some *(St. Martin's Press, 1993). The* Los Angeles Times *described her as "a woman who brings delight through both fine feeling and fine writing." Her first story for* EQMM *shows that she fills that bill . . .*

REFORMING ELLIE

by KATE WILHELM

A relentless February rain was falling when Carol Ballinger left work; it wasn't too bad on Amsterdam, but when she turned onto 110th, the rain came straight at her; she was soaked and freezing by the time she got home. Michael's jacket was dripping from a chair back, and she had to nudge his wet shoes out of the way. She flicked on the answering machine and began to wrestle with her rubber boots that always pulled off her shoes, and often her hose, half listening to calls for Michael. She straightened in surprise at the last message.

"Carol? You there? It's Ellie. Look, I'll be in town on Wednesday night. How 'bout that! I don't guess you could meet my plane? A joke, honey, forget it, I'll find you."

Carol listened to it again as she finished taking off her wet clothes and hung her jacket on the other chair back, acutely aware of the near-tremulous feeling of excitement that verged on dread that Ellie had often aroused in her. Irritably she shrugged off the feeling, a

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fossil from her childhood. She heard Michael behind her and turned. "Did you hear the message? Ellie's coming to visit."

"Who's Ellie?" he asked, toweling his hair. He looked cross. He hated getting wet, possibly as much as she did.

"I've told you all about her," Carol said. His blank look was not a pretense, she knew; she brushed against him on her way to the bathroom for another towel. Belatedly he moved back a step. "If you'd ever listen to anything I say," she muttered and slammed the door.

Dinner was reheated spaghetti with canned sauce.

"Where's she going to sleep?" Michael asked, as they ate.

"On the couch."

"How long?"

"You heard her message. You know as much as I do. You didn't mind when Lon Voorhees parked out on the couch for more than a month last fall."

"That was different."

"Right. He's your friend. Well, she's mine."

"Damn it, Carol, I'm not objecting."

"You should go look at your expression in the mirror."

It had been almost cute when he used to pout like that. He was large, over six feet, and broad, with curly black hair, an enviable fringe of eyelashes; the little-boy look had been unexpected and appealing ten years ago. She jerked up and away from the table and started to scrape her dish noisily.

Of course, the apartment was too small for a third person to share. Five hundred square feet—two bedrooms, the living room, with eating space, barely, a kitchen that only one person at a time could enter, the tiniest bathroom she had ever seen. The interior paint once had been neutral, a non-color, but now it was more like mustard; the furniture was brown Naugahyde and rickety, and things were everywhere because there wasn't any storage room. Books, magazines, his school notebooks, her notebooks. . . . Michael used the second, cavelike bedroom as his study, where he now headed without scraping his plate, or even taking his dishes to the sink. Angrily Carol cleared the table, washed the dishes, and then listened to Ellie's drawling voice once more.

She had known Ellie Withers all her life; they had lived side by side in nearly identical houses in a subdivision outside of Tulsa, had toddled together, had gone to preschool, to kindergarten, all the way through high school together. Most people had thought they were

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sisters, even twin sisters. Blond, hair darkening a bit through their teens, blue eyes. . . .

Ellie had asked her one night, "How do you hold your arms when you sleep?"

"I don't know. How do you?"

"Straight down at my sides. Or else crossed on my chest, like this." She demonstrated. "And you should move them once every fifteen minutes or you could get gangrene, and they have to cut off your hand."

Carol hadn't really believed her, but she had worried about it for months. She had tried to catch herself falling asleep, or coming awake, tried to check the position of her arms.

Another time, later, Ellie had said, "They know if you're bleeding. If you're ready to go all the way. They can smell the difference in you. Like cats or dogs can."

They had been twelve, approaching a corner where half a dozen adolescent boys were fooling around, and Carol had suddenly wanted to crawl into the hedge at Mrs. McKittrick's yard where they were walking.

For years she had taken two, three showers a day, immersed herself in long, scented bubble baths, used cologne lavishly, dabbed on her mother's perfume. . . .

Ellie had broken the news about Santa Claus; she had known that Miss Erenhart was pregnant and would have to drop out of teaching seventh grade. She had sworn a girl could get pregnant by French kissing, and later on said that if you stood up right after sex, you wouldn't get pregnant.

They had stayed in touch only sporadically after high school; Ellie had borrowed three hundred dollars from Carol, and had run off with Bert Lowenstein. Although Carol would have been too embarrassed, even ashamed, to ask about the loan, or demand payment, Ellie had never given her an address where she could have been reached, either. But she always knew where Carol was. There had been a card now and then, never with a return address, and a phone call now and then during which she dodged the question of where she was living. Ellie by phone, or by mail, never had roused the feeling of anxiety that her coming visit had brought on. Ellie in person was different.

Michael had begun to pace the length of the hall from his study to the living room, and back, his forehead deeply creased as he muttered unintelligibly. In fourteen weeks he would take the bar

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exam, and then things would be different, she told herself, as she had been doing more and more frequently, counting the months, then the weeks. Soon she would be counting the days.

She watched Michael a moment and then began to work on an article she was doing for a gardening magazine.

"Did you pick up my jacket?" Michael asked, at the entrance to the living room.

"Raining too hard."

"Get it tomorrow, will you? Another seminar at Dirac's this weekend. I'll need it."

She put down her pen. "Then why don't you get it yourself?"

He had already left and was midway down the hall. He stopped, turned to give her a puzzled look. "It's closer for you."

"By one lousy block. And it's your jacket."

"Look," he said reasonably, with that pouting look on his face, "just this once. Okay? I won't have time tomorrow."

"Neither will I," she said.

"Jesus," he said, shaking his head. "I have that paper to write, a test coming up, a tax seminar to prepare for. . . . Don't do this to me."

She knew what all he had to do: Michael dutifully reported to her every assignment, every problem, every word said at the seminars. She shrugged and picked up her pen. After a moment, she heard his study door slam, and she put the pen down and drew in a deep breath; her hand was shaking. She had done it, she thought in wonder. She had turned him down.

Fourteen more weeks, she told herself. Just fourteen more weeks. Don't make waves now. Her lips tightened. But damned if she would fetch his jacket. After another moment she began to write: *For that shady spot between the back of the garage and the fence I put in some hostas a few years ago, but last summer I decided that wasn't quite enough, and now I'm glad. Bergenias are up in full bud, and the dicentra alba is starting to open. The cheiranthus has spread. . . .*

Ellie had not changed a bit was Carol's first thought, even as Ellie was screaming how little *she* had changed. Then they both cried and hugged each other, and touched each other's hair—Ellie's was long, blonder than it had ever been in the past, and very frizzy; Carol's was shades darker and quite short. They hugged and kissed again, and it really was like having a sister appear after a very long absence.

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Ellie was wearing ecru tights and a purple sweater, purple suede boots, and a violet jacket of suede cloth. And yes, she admitted, she was frozen, and starved.

Now, diffraction grating in long dangling earrings caught the light, broke it into a million blinding bits as she tossed her hair back, swung her head from side to side, taking in Michael and Carol alternately. "So I decided to give the big city a try, get a job, have a little fun in the Big Time. . . ."

Carol was at the stove scrambling eggs for her; Michael and Ellie were at the table. "What kind of job?" he asked, at the same instant that Carol cried, "Ellie, that's wonderful! It will be great to have you around again!"

Ellie laughed. "I thought so too."

Michael pursed his lips and stood up. "Back to the grind," he said, and headed for his study.

It was close to one-thirty before Carol got to bed, groggy with fatigue, but too keyed up to go to sleep. Michael stirred and rolled over, made room, pretending to be asleep. She knew he was pretending by the way he breathed. She pretended to believe in his sleep, and stared at the ceiling where lights from across the street made a pattern of overlapping circles, dark, light, dark. . . . She was listening to the traffic, clashes, doors slamming, sirens, squealing brakes. . . . She hadn't heard it for years; it wasn't too bad since they were on the third floor, but she imagined it must sound loud and exciting to Ellie. Carol's mother at one time had decided to reform Ellie; she had tried kindness, tried bribes, tried bullying her, tried stories of girls who went wild. . . . There had been no chance at reforming Ellie ever.

Ellie took things. Carol had been with her once when she decided she wanted a two-hundred-dollar sweater. Ellie had told her exactly what to do: Carol was to take a lot of garments into the dressing room, keep changing them, keep the saleswoman's eyes on her while Ellie got the sweater on, her own sweatshirt over it, and fussed at Carol for being so slow. It had worked, and Carol had confessed to her mother a week later in an agony of guilt. Most of the kids she knew had lifted things now and then, and she had done it, too—a pen, candy bars, comic books, but the things Ellie stole were different. And Carol's fears had been different.

She followed a dark circle until it changed into a light circle, and drifted inward to sleep. Then she came wide awake with the problem of where she put her arms when she slept.

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* * *

When she got home on Thursday, she felt frozen. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees and a stiff wind had moved in. Ellie and Michael were in the living room where Ellie's couch-bed was still more bed than couch. Ellie was wearing Carol's nicest robe, a rose-colored silk/wool blend that her mother had sent her.

Ellie stroked the robe. "Mike's been telling me all about estate planning, how to avoid probate, how to shield yourself from too much tax."

"That's nice," Carol said, pulling off her heavy khaki jacket. Ugly as sin, was how she thought of it, but it was the warmest thing she owned. She tossed it over a chair in order to put on a pot of coffee, and in her mind she saw herself picking up the little overnight suitcase Ellie had brought, walking out the door wearing her good coat, leaving them to talk about taxes forever. Startled by the clarity of the vision, how right it felt, she snatched up her jacket and fled to change her clothes.

After dinner, when Michael left them, Carol asked what had happened to Bert Lowenstein.

Ellie looked blank for several seconds. "You remember him? I honestly had forgotten about him. We split after a week." She shrugged. "I thought for sure you'd go on through school, make a career for yourself. You know you've got roaches?"

"Plans change," Carol said, remembering more and more of what it was like to be with Ellie. Now it came back to her that this was always one of her tactics: touch her in a sore spot and she retaliated swiftly. She had told Ellie about her job last night, designer in a big flower shop, in a back room where she arranged flowers. Baskets of flowers. Bouquets. Corsages. "You never did say what kind of job you have in mind."

"Is there any more coffee?" Ellie asked.

Michael came to the end of the hall. "Carol, where's the cleaning ticket for my jacket? I'll pick it up tomorrow."

"I don't know," she said. "Wherever you put it."

"I put it on your purse this morning."

"Then maybe it dropped off when I picked up my purse."

He glowered at her and wheeled about, returned to his study. She got up to make another pot of coffee, ignoring the knowing look on Ellie's face. A mistake, she told herself crossly. Ellie never took things that were free. Again she was jolted by the thought that swam in her mind.

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Ellie's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "What do you guys do? What do you do for fun?"

"Nothing." Fourteen weeks, she thought desperately. Fourteen weeks.

"Do they pay much for those articles you write? That looks like fun. Even if it is cheating, pretending like that."

"Hundred per article. One a month. It's a small-circulation magazine, shoestring stuff."

"Oh."

Although they talked late into the night again, she learned nothing about Ellie's plans. A job. An apartment. Low on cash right now, broke actually, could Carol spare twenty for a couple of days? Expecting a phone call tomorrow, maybe. Money coming any day. She just had that one very small suitcase, but that wouldn't slow her down, not with a closet full of Carol's things that would all fit. Carol had counted out twenty-two dollars, two dollars of it in change; she had loaned Ellie fifteen.

Sleep was a long time coming. She was too conscious of Michael's deep breathing, an occasional snore, too conscious of Ellie's question: What do you do for fun?

She could still unerringly put her finger on a sore spot, Carol thought then. Fun! Her career! She had dropped out of school when it became very evident that there was not going to be enough money for both of them to stay in. His grants, his student loans, and her small salary barely housed and fed them with her working full-time. He would get his degree, work, and she would return to finish her education was the plan in the beginning, but they had not mentioned it in years. Then the plan was for him to make a lot of money, for them to move out of the city, so she could have a house with a yard and a garden. They hadn't talked about that for years, either.

Friday morning she found the ticket for Michael's jacket, packed his bag for him, and tried to keep out of the way as he dashed about. Ellie was on the couch with the blanket over her head when Carol left.

Red and white carnations, asparagus fern, a sprig of holly, two bergenia leaves. . . . If she walked over to the Broadway Mart, and then stopped for wine, it wouldn't be much out of her way. Her boss, Mrs. Bertelsen, wouldn't mind if she left early, she knew. She had to go to the bank, she remembered, another block. Four sprays of freesias, with their heady fragrance, lemon mums. . . . She could be

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home by three-thirty, surprise Ellie, have a nice dinner with just the two of them, maybe even find out something about Ellie's life during the past decade, her plans for now, maybe even confide in her the worrisome thoughts that had been occurring ever since she heard Ellie's voice on the answering machine. Ellie the catalyst.

They had drifted apart after the sweater incident. Carol had taken a job in order to save for college. They had still ridden the same bus to school, and had gone to the same parties, the same school dances and football games, but it had changed by then. Carol's mother had been relieved; she had been a nurse, with little regard for Ellie's mother, who lived off an insurance settlement and various men who appeared in her life and vanished. Ellie's father had died in an accident at work. Carol's father had walked out when she was six months old. Two fatherless girls, growing up side by side, almost like sisters.

At ten before three Carol left work. The sharp cold air stunned her; she drew her scarf up tighter and headed for Broadway. Not many people were out walking and those who were had bundled up past recognition. Traffic was heavier than usual; visible air that smelled of exhaust and oil blasted her face. She walked fast, keeping her head down.

At the market she bought makings for burritos, and a carton of cole slaw. She paused at the door to button up her jacket again, to readjust the scarf, and facing out, seeing the traffic on Broadway, she saw Ellie in a taxi. She was in the backseat, wearing Carol's good coat, laughing.

Using her fifteen dollars for a taxi! She watched it out of sight, and then began to walk, forgetting the bank, forgetting the wine. She had given Ellie good instructions about the Broadway bus schedule, which stop to use, where the subway was, how much it would cost. A taxi. She trudged home, climbed up the three flights of stairs, disgusted at herself for giving Ellie the money she had planned to stretch out to next Tuesday.

She automatically put away her groceries and then stood in the kitchen, looking at the living-room space where Ellie's bed was rumpled and unmade, her small suitcase in the middle of the floor, Carol's nice robe half on the bed, half on the floor. The telephone rang and she picked it up simply to avoid listening to Michael's message, the caller's message.

"Oh, Ellie, glad I caught you," a man's voice, clipped and very fast. "Look, the reservation's set up, at the Mayfair Regent on Park

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Avenue. I gave them my credit-card number, yours will be valid by Monday. After you're settled in, call Bud—"

"Wait a minute," Carol said. "I'm afraid you've—"

"Ellie, I gotta go, like now. Take this down. Bud Castleman. He'll give you the stuff I faxed out there, and an advance if you need it for the weekend. Is that a laugh or what? Ready for the number?" He didn't wait for a response, but rattled off a telephone number that Carol wrote on the telephone pad. "Gotta go, kid, like I said. Give me a call on Monday at the office. Have fun, Mrs. Farley." He hung up.

Carol sat down abruptly, staring at the words she had written. Mayfair Regent, Park Avenue. Bud Castleman. She pushed the message button on the machine and listened to two calls for Michael, and then the same man's voice: "Harve Wannamaker calling Elinor Farley. You there, Ellie?" then Ellie's answer, the click.

She blinked hard. Ellie had said she was expecting a call, money was due, but the Mayfair Regent? She blinked again and stood up; then, eyeing the suitcase, she crossed the room and lifted it. The suitcase had a combination lock. All through school they had used each other's birthdays for the combination locks on their hall lockers. She turned the numbers to six, one, seven, and it sprang open. Underwear, hose . . . and a large manila envelope, thick with papers, newspaper articles, some legal documents. . . . She sat on the unmade couch/bed and started to read; when she finished she replaced everything, rose dazedly, and walked from the living room to her bedroom where she sat on the side of her own bed.

Elinor Farley's husband James, aged sixty-eight, had died in an accident last April, leaving an estate of nearly two million dollars to his widow. Farley's grown son, Sutton Farley, had contested the will, and also had accused his stepmother of murdering his father.

In Carol's head a scene from the past replayed in stark clarity; they had been sixteen or seventeen. "Don't be an airhead," Ellie had said coldly, waving her hand to dry nail polish. "Mom's got the right idea, just the wrong guys. She always thinks they have money, and they never do. What you do is find an old geezer with dough, give him a few good years, and then do him in and collect. Simple, and it's not even terrible. Get one who's going to kick soon anyway, what's the big deal?"

Girl talk. Just crazy girl talk. Like you're going to snag a rock star, or be a movie star, or a model, or marry a rich old man and inherit a fortune. Two million dollars!

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She didn't move when she heard Ellie return. She didn't know what to say, how to act. Ellie went to the kitchen, listened to the answering machine, made rustling sounds; then she went to the bathroom and Carol could hear water running. Finally she stood up and moved out into the hall, to the bathroom door, which was open; in the cramped space Ellie was at the sink washing something. A wig! She turned and looked startled momentarily; her hand flew to her own hair, which was as short and as dark as Carol's. Then she shrugged, and turned back to the wig.

"Shit," she muttered. She had not immersed the wig, but was dabbing at it with a washcloth.

"I took a call for you," Carol said. "Harve Wannamaker."

Ellie stopped scrubbing the wig. "And?"

"He made you a hotel reservation."

Ellie let out a whoop and flung the washcloth down in the sink. Water splashed her and she laughed and turned to leave the bathroom. Carol stepped into the kitchen out of the way.

"What else did he say?"

Carol repeated the message and Ellie hugged herself and spun around. "An advance! He'd better come loaded! Where's your phone book? What hotel?"

Carol watched her punch in the numbers, listened numbly when she asked if there was a confirmed reservation for Elinor Farley; she banged down the receiver, and whooped again. "Come on, let's go!" Ellie cried. She ripped the note from the pad and stuffed it into the purse on the table, tossed the wig high in the air, caught it, and threw it across the room onto the couch, laughing.

"What do you mean? Go where?"

"Look, I told you I was expecting a call, money's due. Well, it's here, or will be on Monday. It was cleared too late today to be touchable until Monday, but for now I have a reservation at a snazzy hotel. Be my guest, honey. We'll have room service, whatever you want, lobster, truffles, pheasant under glass! Champagne! My God, yes!"

Watching her, Carol shivered, as if the cold air had entered her, was lodged just under her rib cage. She shook her head.

"Hey, it's for real, kid!" Ellie cried, laughing. "I told you I was married, it didn't last? He sort of made a settlement on me. It's real!"

"You did it, didn't you?" Carol whispered.

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Ellie's smile vanished; her face became masklike. She looked swiftly at her suitcase, back at Carol. "You nosy bitch! Come, stay, do whatever you want. I'm outta here."

When she reached for the coat Carol grabbed it. "You can't have it," she said.

For a moment Ellie looked murderous, but shrugged, and started to walk toward the couch, then stopped, and without turning she said, "How about lending me another ten or fifteen for a cab."

"I don't have it."

Ellie faced her angrily. "Come on, after I see this Bud what's-his-face, I'll pay it back, and the other fifteen, plus interest."

"I didn't get to the bank."

Ellie's fists clenched. She was wearing Carol's best dress, and her navy shoes, and on the table where she had tossed it was Carol's navy purse, with travel brochures sticking out.

"Tell me again about the bus and subway," Ellie said furiously. "Which is quicker?"

She would never see her clothes again, Carol knew, or the fifteen dollars, or the three hundred Ellie had borrowed in the distant past. She could live without the money, but she couldn't replace the clothes. Slowly she said, "I'll go with you. You can wear the dress until we get to your room, and you collect from that man. Then you can pay me what you owe me, and I'll bring my stuff back in your suitcase. You won't want it after this, I suppose."

Ellie regarded her through narrowed eyes. "What I owe you? The fifteen bucks?"

"Plus the three hundred you borrowed ten years ago."

"And the forty I got from your mom's purse, mustn't forget a penny."

The cold was spreading all through Carol, even to her lips, which had turned too numb to speak. She nodded. She had not believed it, that Ellie had taken the money from her mother's purse. She had pleaded her case, convinced her mother that Ellie wouldn't do that to a friend.

"Okay," Ellie said finally. "Deal. I'll get my stuff from the bathroom." She walked to the bathroom, talking. "Listen, honey, I earned that money, every damn penny. And if I hadn't got it, that bastard Sutton would have. He managed to get every cent frozen as hard as the Antarctic. I had to sell everything I had just to stay alive this year. He hadn't even seen his father for fifteen years, nothing, no calls, zilch. Not when the old man had a heart attack,

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not when we got married, nothing. And he's got bucks he's never got around to counting. A movie producer! A goddamn movie producer! Well, it's mine now!"

Carol had read all this in the articles in the suitcase.

Ellie came out with her toothbrush and a comb, went to the suitcase and opened it, stashed her things away, tossed in the boots, picked up the wig, made a face at it, and threw it in also. She started to put on the cloth jacket.

"You can wear my heavy jacket," Carol said.

"How generous of you," Ellie said darkly, but she threw her own jacket into the suitcase, closed it, and turned the combination. Then she looked at Carol and said, "Listen, sweetie: that guy of yours is bad news. I know the type. He'll let you foot the bills until he's got it made, and then he'll find someone more suitable, a Bennington girl, or someone like that. You didn't learn a thing from your mother, did you? My God, your own mother put your father through medical school and he took a powder. Get something in writing now before it's too late."

"My mother is very happily married," Carol said stiffly.

"To a sheepherder in Australia! You call that a life?"

He wasn't a sheepherder; he was a rancher, with enough money to give her mother a good life at last. Ellie had said that her mother was in Phoenix, or Taos, or someplace like that; they hadn't been in touch for years.

The bitter cold air took away her breath when they left the apartment. Carol ducked her head against the wind and thought how wrong Ellie was about Michael. He would never leave her, she knew; he needed her. In the beginning she had found that need reassuring, even comforting; no one had ever needed her before he had come into her life, an overgrown little boy with a bashful smile, beautiful eyelashes. A little boy who clung to her and made her feel strong and capable. A little boy who confided in her, told her everything about himself, his fears, his worries, his insecurities. No, she thought almost grimly, he would never leave her. No matter what he did in school, at his seminars, it was that little boy who came home to her night after night and talked interminably about his fears, his worries, his plans.

She led Ellie to the IRT-7th Avenue subway station. At this time of day, nearly five, the bus would be jammed and slow. At the stairs Ellie hesitated; without ceremony Carol shoved her into the mass of people going down and they were swept along.

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This was how fish moved in schools, she thought, how birds flew in flocks; no decisions, you just got into the swarm and went where it took you. The swarm moved down the stairs to the platform and spread out a bit as a new swarm pressed in from behind. She nudged Ellie down the platform farther, closer to the edge, and they stopped where she knew the door would open. Ellie put the suitcase down between them and Carol thought to tell her not to let go of it, but she said nothing and looked in the other direction. Let her learn the hard way. The train was coming; the roar began to shake the platform, and the people swarm pressed in harder.

Just as she turned back she saw a gloved hand jab at Ellie, while another hand grabbed for her purse as she staggered forward off-balance. Carol lunged for Ellie's arm at the same moment that someone else pushed her, and, twisting, she fell over the suitcase. Her cheek hit the platform hard; the suitcase knocked the breath out of her and she struggled for air. The roar was drowned out by one long scream.

People got her to her feet, moved her, made room around her. Someone was holding her up, telling her she was all right. People were yelling, a siren sounded too close, and through the noise she kept hearing a choking, unrecognizable voice: "She was pushed over the edge! The train was coming and she was pushed. I tried to grab her. She was pushed over."

"Take it easy, lady. Just take it easy now. Okay? Is this yours?" A lean woman in a police uniform held out the blue purse and Carol reached for it. "Okay, in a second. Did you see anyone?"

"Hands. Gloves. She was pushed over the edge! Oh God!" She choked on the words and buried her face in her hands, crying. "Oh, my God! He pushed her over the edge!"

More voices. She paid no attention. She should have warned Ellie, should have caught her, should have protected her. She sobbed harder. Then someone had her arm, moving her again. Out into the cold, into a car. She should have grabbed Ellie's arm, screamed. . . .

"What we're going to do is take you to your hotel. We called your lawyer, Mr. Castleman. He'll meet us there with a doctor. Just to make sure you're okay. Then we'll get a statement and leave you alone to get some rest."

Carol froze as the officer talked. They thought she was Ellie. Her hotel, her lawyer. She shuddered. When she opened her mouth to say that wasn't right, only a groan came out.

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At the hotel the manager hovered until the officer ordered him to bring up the registration book later, to send up coffee now, send up Mr. Castleman when he arrived. She was leading Carol to the elevator when two men approached them.

"Castleman," one of them said, tall, heavy, gray-haired, with thick glasses. "This is Dr. Jervis. My God, this is terrible, Mrs. Farley. Terrible."

Again Carol opened her mouth to correct the mistake; she raised her hand in a gesture for him to stop and saw blood all over her fingers, on the back of her hand; she swayed and closed her eyes. Dr. Jervis had one hand on her wrist by then.

"Let's get her to her room and have a look," he said, and they entered the elevator and rode to the tenth floor. In the suite Dr. Jervis took her to the bathroom and cleaned her abrasions with a washcloth that was as soft as a cloud. "Just skinned up," he said cheerfully, cleaning her hand. He had her undress and put on a fluffy hotel robe and pressed her ribs, examined her shoulders and back. "Nothing time won't take care of," he said, washing his own hands at the sink. "I'll leave you a tranquilizer, and aspirins."

When he left her in the bathroom she looked at it in wonder. It was bigger than her kitchen and bath combined, and everything sparkled. And she thought, she could do it. A wave of terror buckled her knees; she clutched the edge of the sink until it passed, and then regarded herself in a wall-sized mirror and nodded. She could do it. Michael would see the short darkened hair, the ugly jacket, the dress. Ellie wouldn't be recognizable. Michael would see what he expected to see. There was a little insurance, enough to get him through the next fourteen weeks. Then he would find the Bennington girl and tell her his troubles, cry on her shoulder. Forever.

When she went back out to the sitting room, wearing the robe, holding a wet washcloth against her face, the doctor was gone. Bud Castleman and the police officer were both standing up; he was hard and mean-looking. The officer looked wary.

"Mrs. Farley," the officer said, "could you answer a question or two from Mr. Castleman, just to verify your identity?"

"How did he get here? Harve said I should call Bud Castleman, but I didn't. Not yet."

"We called him," the officer said. "I found the note with his name and number in your purse."

Castleman's grim expression eased a fraction, but he was still studying her intently. "You're not what I expected," he said after a

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moment. "Can you tell me your mother's maiden name?"

"My mother? Doreen Claypool."

"Mrs. Farley," the officer said when Castleman nodded slightly, "why don't you sit down here and have some coffee and tell me what happened, all you can remember." She gave Castleman a look of disgust and opened a notebook.

Carol sank down into a chair gratefully. She ached all over. "We were coming here. Harve called and said the reservation was made, and we were going to have room service bring up dinner . . . "

She was unconscious of the watchfulness of Bud Castleman as she spoke. The manager arrived with the registration book. She signed it shakily; Castleman compared the signature to the note she had jotted earlier. When the manager left, she raised her scraped hand to her hair, and said, "Harve told you I have long blond hair. Is that it?"

"He did," Castleman admitted.

"It's in the suitcase," she said. When she started to get up, she swayed and sank back to the chair.

"What's the combination?" Castleman asked, still watching her closely.

She told him and he opened the suitcase, pulled out the wig and the little suede cloth jacket, and looked satisfied finally.

"It got dirty," she said, closing her eyes. "A pigeon, or something."

After the officer left, Bud Castleman ordered a bottle of wine from room service and began to talk about money, and she listened with her eyes closed, thinking about Ellie, and then thinking of gardens in Italy, in the south of France.

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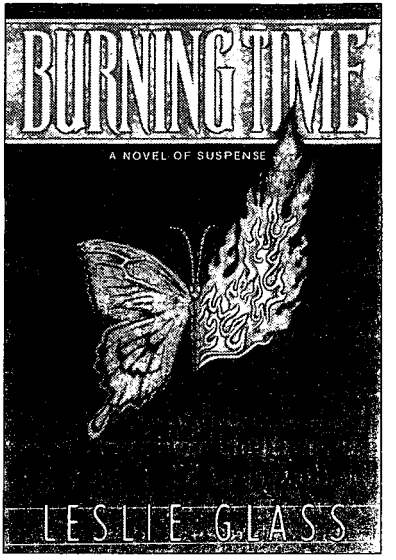

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A former editor of Official Detective Stories *and* The Psychiatric Journal, *Seymour Shubin was nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1982 for his novel* The Captain. *He has had eight novels published to date, the most recent being* Remember Me Always *(Berkley, January 1994). . . .*

A RACE AMONG FRIENDS

by SEYMOUR SHUBIN

Let me tell you, I was horrified when Marybeth let it slip out. *Horrified.* Then the anger surged in: *fury.* At him—how could he? Then at myself. But then after a few moments I began to laugh. Cackle, I guess, is more like it. At least that's what Marybeth's eyes told me she was hearing.

The whole thing started in the basement auditorium of the church, the Lutheran church in our neighborhood where the cub scouts met once a month. On this particular evening, the notice that came out to us said that the fathers should try to come with the kids, not just the mothers. Well, Marybeth thought it was a good idea if I went along with Billy: bonding, you know. And it so happens that's what Paula agreed Ray should do with Jonathan. They were our neighbors down the street and Billy and Jonathan were best friends. In fact, that's how Paula and Ray became *our* best friends.

Anyway, that evening all the kids sat on the floor, in their blue uniforms, while the parents—mostly fathers—sat on folding chairs, listening to the cub scout master explain what this meeting was all about. Once a year they held a Pinewood Derby, a race of little model cars which the kids were to make. Each kid would be given a little block of pinewood, out of which they were to carve the car. They were also given nails, which would serve as axles, as well as four plastic wheels. The kids could make any design they wanted; it could be any color.

Mr. Dubin, the local pharmacist who'd been the cub scout master for years, and I must say looked somewhat silly in his uniform, explained that the cars would race down a long, steeply curved track

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that would run almost the length of the auditorium. The event, which was to be held in two months, would consist of several heats and, of course, a final, all of which would be held on the same evening.

Any questions, fellows? he asked, addressing it to the kids, though Ray and I, walking home, with Billy and Jonathan way in front of us, wondered how the hell they expected kids to do it. I mean, they were *nine*.

"You got it right," Ray said, "they mean us."

"Oh God," I said, and it was a wail I meant. I could barely hammer a nail straight; I needed a plumber to put in washers.

There was no way I could do it, there was no way Billy could do it. I tried to put it out of my mind—after all, two months. But it started haunting me. I found myself waking up nights with a hammering heart, not knowing what it was all about until I remembered that little kit in the basement. I would find myself thinking of it at work, trying to sell a TV or a dishwasher but with my mind on how I could even *begin* carving it. I finally took it up with one of the other salesmen.

"You kidding?" Max said. "You don't do it, you hire someone to do it."

And with this, all the pulsing weight in me lifted; I felt free—until I thought of what this could do to Billy. I tried to be a role model, to instill in him all the virtues. And now for him to take a car to that race and pretend that we had made it.

I couldn't do that, and wouldn't you know, that same evening Billy said at dinner, "Jonathan's father started his."

As flame went through my chest, I said, "Did you see it?"

"No. But Jonathan says it's terrific."

Later that evening I went to a store and bought some racing magazines. I wanted to see a picture of something I might be able to try. I decided on the simplest one I could find, and that night I went down to the basement, took out the block of wood, and sketched in pencil an outline of the car.

The following night I began to carve it and was amazed enough at how it was taking shape that I called Billy away from his homework.

"Hey," he said, grinning, "let me." He reached for the knife.

"Wait, let me get it further along." If he made any wrong cuts, that would be the end of that.

In just a few days I had something with a nice shape to it. And Billy had stopped asking.

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Meanwhile, Max had given me another idea. He knew a guy who knew a guy, he said, who hollowed out the bottom of his kid's car near the front and inserted a fishing sinker, then covered it up with wood filler. It pushed the center of gravity toward the front, gave it a lot more speed on the incline.

"It's not illegal," Max said when he saw the look on my face. "What I heard about this guy, he wouldna done it."

I wanted to ask Ray, whom I met almost every day at the train into the city. But he hadn't even told me he'd started the thing, though I'd asked.

"Not yet, no," he'd said, touching his forehead as though it were giving him a headache. "You?"

"No."

"I don't think I'll even have one."

"I don't either."

I was so mad that I had Marybeth cancel our going out with them for dinner that Saturday.

"But why?"

"He's such a damn liar. You know, I ask him did he start the car, he said no."

"You know—you expect perfection from people. Did you tell him you were working on it?"

"Look, he said no first, why should I tell him? And anyway, there you go again. If I say white you say black."

"Pete."

"Don't Pete me. It's true. I don't remember the last time you ever stuck up for me."

I didn't even want to look at her. I went to the basement. The thing was really taking shape by now. I'd carved out the seat, sanded the whole thing, and was ready to put on the axles and wheels. I got them on. And though the wheels wobbled a bit, I started thinking about what color to paint it.

"Billy," I called upstairs.

"He's in his room, he's reading," Marybeth said.

"I just want to ask him something."

"Billy," she called. "Daddy wants you."

His face broke into a smile when he saw it with the wheels on. He took it from me.

"Hey, don't grab it," I said. "You almost took off that wheel."

I took it back from him, gingerly. Then I asked him what we should paint it.

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"Silver?" he said.

I thought. "You really like silver?"

"Yeah."

"What about red?" I said.

"Red?"

"A nice bright red."

"I don't know. Whatever you say," he said, walking to the steps.

"Billy, I'm *asking* you."

"I don't know. Look, I've got homework," he said, walking up the steps.

I stared after him. Those people, I thought disgustedly—did they really expect kids to do this on their own?

Meanwhile I was starting to hear stories. Now, I've forgotten to mention that Ray had a degree in physics, worked in high-tech. I'd never given this any thought until one day Billy asked me what they use wind tunnels for. I explained about aerodynamics and how the tunnel is used to determine the effect of air currents on—

And then right in the middle it hit me. "Why do you ask?"

"I heard Mr. Connelly"—Ray—"talking about it on the phone."

"What did he say?"

"I don't remember. Except somebody was testing something for somebody."

"Look, don't come to me with questions like that unless you know what you're asking about!"

Billy frowned, then drifted into another room.

"What was that about?" Marybeth demanded.

I said, "I'm telling you exactly what's happening. Ray's testing his car out in a wind tunnel."

"I guess it's allowed."

"That's not the thing! God, I can't talk to you anymore!"

I know, I know, it was only a race. And I knew it then, and I felt guilty at how I was behaving, but it killed me that Ray—my good friend, oh my good friend—was out-and-out lying to me. Now and then on the ride to the city I'd ask him how he was doing, saying I was suffering over mine. He would just give a gesture of disgust and a shake of his head. And then finally he said, "I'm letting Jonathan do it. It's not for me."

What a liar, what a liar!

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That night I asked Billy if Jonathan ever mentioned anything about his car.

"Just that his father asked him what color he liked."

See? See? I said, "What did he pick?"

"I don't know, he didn't say."

"Did you ask?"

"No."

"Did he ever ask you?"

"I . . . think. Yeah."

"Did you tell him?"

"Yeah," he said with a shrug. "Red."

I tried not to let my emotions show on my face, but I was thinking: You poor little innocent, how are you ever going to make it in this competitive world? And I thought of *them,* that whole family. What a bunch, what a bunch!

I was proud of our car—it was sleek, it was *pretty.* The wheels still wobbled a little, but that's what a lot of fathers said about theirs as we gathered within a babble of voices in the auditorium. Many of those cars were *really* slick, as though they'd been made by machine, which I don't doubt one bit. But the only one I was interested in was Ray's, and he and Jonathan and Paula were among the last to show up. And then when they did I almost got sick—it was like a thin silver bullet. No way could I—anyone—beat him. And how could we? He must have had half the engineers in his plant work on it, and then there was the wind tunnel—

And he was the only one I wanted to beat.

We didn't sit near each other; and neither of us was in the early heats. They would line the cars up four abreast and, the crowd cheering, release them from the gate, and while some would swerve, others went straight as the proverbial arrow. I kept glancing over at Ray.

Such a secretive guy, such a liar!

And then suddenly I saw that he'd disappeared. I looked around the room, then went into the men's room, then outside. And there in the dark I saw him with one elbow raised, as though he were pouring something.

I said, "What're you doing?"

He turned, startled. "Nothing."

"Don't give me 'nothing.' What is it?"

"Pete, why don't you cool it?"

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I grabbed his arm. And I saw that he was holding the car in one hand, that I'd caught him squirting something on it. I yanked it from him—it had to be some secret lubricant, something concocted in that plant of his!—but as I did he seized hold of my wrist. And that's when my hands darted, widespread, to his throat.

It turned out to be simple graphite for the axles, which though it might have been legal I maintain to this day was immoral. And why would he have gone outside to do it, and at the last *seconds*, though Paula testified on the stand that his sinuses had started giving him trouble and he'd wanted to get some air.

Twenty to life. . . .

For two months or so I didn't see Billy—they wouldn't let him visit yet, and in a way I was glad; I couldn't face him. There were even questions I was afraid to ask Marybeth. But then another feeling began coming—that maybe somehow he would know that what really triggered it all was love, that I didn't want anyone cheating him, hurting him.

It was almost the third month before I got courage enough to ask Marybeth.

"Does he ever say what he feels about me?"

"He loves you."

"How's he holding up?"

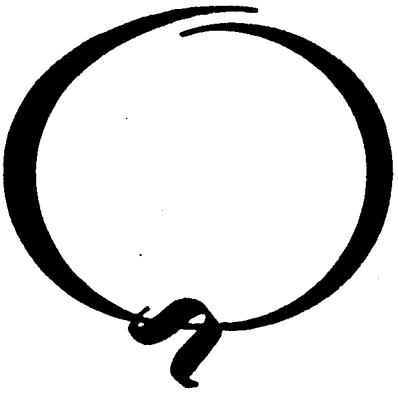
"As well as you might expect."

"Do you know if the kids are giving him a hard time?"

"He doesn't say. But he's involved in a lot of things. He's playing basketball now. And yesterday he and Jonathan went—"

She stopped, undoubtedly at the look on my face.

And then, as I've said, at what I believe sounded like a cackle.



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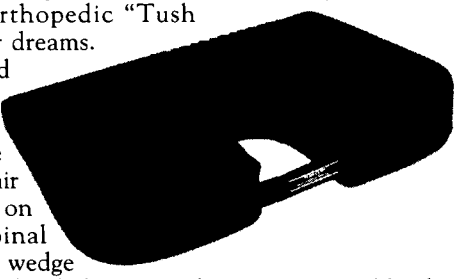

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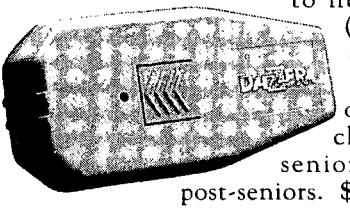

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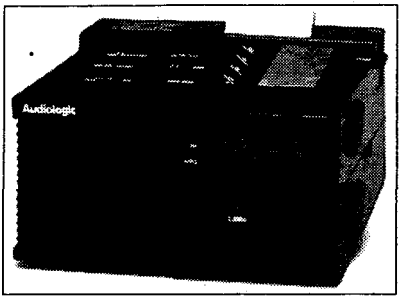

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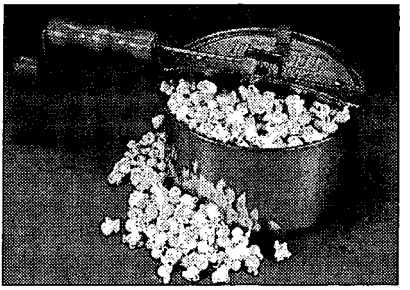

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

With more than seven hundred stories to his credit, Edward D. Hoch has written on just about any subject you can name. But somehow he never got around to writing about one that for a long time has been swimming around at the back of his mind. Here it is at last, a problem involving a built-in pool. Dr. Hawthorne is on the case, and it's the summer of 1937 . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE POISONED POOL

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The summer of '37 had been a busy one for me (old Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his visitor, pausing to lift the glass to his lips), and I was almost relieved when September finally rolled around. The schools were open again and the quiet agricultural pace of a Northmont summer shifted into the increased social activity of autumn. The late-summer county fair had come and gone, but we still had Ernest Holland's clambake to look forward to.

Holland was the publisher of the *Northmont Blade,* the more successful of our two weekly newspapers. He'd moved to the area five or six years back and built himself a fancy house complete with swimming pool. I was hardly in his social circle, but in a town our size few people were. I was his regular doctor, and that was enough to get me invited to the clambake.

"Clambake's next Saturday," he reminded my nurse Mary Best on his way out of the office one mid-September day. "The pool's open so bring your bathing suit."

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"Is he serious about inviting me?" Mary asked after he'd gone.

"Of course he is. I just stopped by briefly at last year's affair but everyone seemed to be having a good time. He had about twenty people there, counting employees."

That was how I ended up driving Mary to the Holland house for the traditional clambake on the last Saturday in September. The *Blade* was published on Friday, and she was reading it in the car. The single column of world news contained little except an item reporting that Mussolini had arrived in Berlin for a four-day visit. "What's he doing there?" Mary wondered. "Getting cozy with Hitler, I'll bet!"

"Could be," I replied. "Anything in the local news?"

"No," she answered hesitantly as she turned the pages. "Oh, here's something in Lydia Mayer's social column. Did you know that Ernest Holland's brother Philip is visiting from California?"

"Never knew he had a brother," I admitted. "But then there's no reason I should have known."

"We'll probably meet him at the clambake."

The day was a bit cool for swimming and Mary hadn't brought her bathing suit after all. I had my trunks in the car but doubted that I'd try the water either. We parked in a roped-off area where Mark Towers was directing new arrivals. Mark was a fellow around forty, about my age, who'd worked at the paper ever since Holland lured him away from the rival weekly. He looked younger, probably because he exercised regularly and kept his weight down. Mary informed me that he was one of the town's most eligible bachelors.

"Just a plain old Buick, Doc?" he greeted me. "You used to drive some pretty sporty roadsters."

"That was in my younger days, Mark. I'm all settled down now."

"Go on! You're a bachelor just like me. We know where the fun is." He glanced knowingly at Mary Best and I came close to punching him. Instead I blushed and walked away.

She hurried after me as I strode purposefully toward the front door. "Don't mind him," she told me. "I don't."

"The trouble with Mark Towers is that he thinks everyone is like him."

Holland's wife Sue greeted us at the door. She was dark-haired and lovely, with the sort of cheerful good looks that come with money, a leisurely life, and monthly trips to a Boston beauty salon. "Good to see you, Sam. We're glad you could make it."

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She glanced at Mary and I quickly introduced them. Sue Holland had her own doctor over in Shinn Corners, so they'd never met on a professional basis. "So nice to meet you, Mary. Ernest thinks you're great! He's always talking about how efficient you are."

"I just make it seem that way," Mary replied with a smile. "It's easy with a boss like Sam."

"Come on in and grab a drink. We'll be eating around five o'clock. In the meantime there's the pool if the cool weather hasn't put you off."

The first person we encountered was wearing bathing trunks and carrying a glass of beer. He looked like a younger version of Ernest Holland, and I guessed correctly that this was his visiting brother from California. "You must be Philip," I said, extending my hand. "I'm Dr. Sam Hawthorne, and this is my nurse Mary Best."

He gave my hand a firm shake. Up close, his skin was tanned and a bit weathered, betrayed by too many hours exposed to the California sun. "Nice meeting you, Doctor. My brother has mentioned you."

"Isn't it too cold to go swimming?" Mary asked.

"Not for me. Back home I'm in the water virtually every day of the year. Slip into your suit and join me."

"I left it home," she admitted.

A silver-haired woman appeared and I recognized Lydia Mayer, the paper's social editor. I'd always thought it a bit presumptuous of a weekly the size of the *Blade* to even have a society column, but people in Northmont liked it and the column was credited with boosting the paper's circulation. "Hello, Phil," she said, snapping his picture with a box camera. "Showing off your body again?"

"For you, doll, anytime!" He grinned and went off with his beer. Lydia shrugged. "One of life's little tribulations. The boss's brother." She was one of those women whose age was always a mystery. She might have been thirty or fifty, but I'd have bet on the latter. "Come on, let's get a drink."

Ernest Holland was at the catered bar with his wife, drinking whiskey on the rocks while she sipped a tall Tom Collins through a straw. "Sue told me you were here," he said. "What'll you have?"

Lydia settled for a martini while Mary, who rarely drank, took a plain ginger ale. I had a little bourbon and followed the others outside. Mark Towers had come up from the parking area to join the guests, so I assumed everyone had arrived. It was a mixed crowd consisting of Holland's employees plus some friends and acquaint-

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ances like myself. He'd never been on awfully good terms with the town fathers, though I noticed that his minister, white-haired Dr. Fredricks, was in attendance.

Some of the younger guests were playing croquet on the lawn, but Mary and I stuck close to our host and hostess. That was how we ended up, a half-hour later, in a semicircle of metal chairs about ten feet from the edge of the pool. Ernest and Sue were there, along with Lydia Mayer and Mark Towers. There was no sign of Ernest's brother.

"What do you think about the German situation?" Holland asked me. "Some people think Hitler is leading the country into war."

"Oh, it's hard to say. I can't believe he'd repeat the kaiser's mistakes so soon."

"Mussolini has gone to Berlin to meet with him, wearing a uniform created especially for the occasion. They say Hitler will turn out a million people next week to hear the two of them speak."

"Men must always talk of war," Sue Holland objected, sipping her drink, but the men ignored her.

Mark Towers lit a Cuban cigar. "I don't think we have much to worry about. The British should be able to keep Hitler in line."

"You should be editing a big-city paper, Mark," Lydia told him. "It's all right for me to be doing my little social column in a town like Northmont, but you need to be writing about the world scene." Towers was nominally the editor of the *Northmont Blade,* though it was well known that Holland himself made virtually all the editorial decisions.

Sue went off to see how the food was coming while the others launched into a discussion of the relative merits of small-town and big-city newspaper publishing. I got up and walked over to gaze at the placid surface of the empty pool. Ernest Holland once told me that he'd wanted a swimming pool ever since reading *The Great Gatsby* back in the mid-1920s. It was a large pool, probably forty feet long by twenty feet wide, with a diving board at the deep end and steps at the shallow end. The edge of the pool was covered in tile like a bathroom floor, with a lip that extended out a couple of inches over the water. It was placid now with barely a breeze blowing, and I had a distorted view of the bottom, painted a tempting blue-green like some Caribbean sky. It was almost all I needed to lure me in, but I was careful to remain far enough back from the edge.

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I returned to the others to find Mary Best looking bored and Ernest Holland expounding on the ambiance of a big-city newsroom. Apparently he'd worked briefly at the New York *Herald-Tribune* in his younger days. "Of course this was in the twenties, and it was like something out of the play *The Front Page*.

"People hiding in roll-top desks?" Lydia murmured.

"I remember one time," Ernest began, and suddenly Mary pointed toward the pool.

"Look there! It's your brother!"

Everyone looked, and saw a dripping Philip Holland boosting himself out of the swimming pool. "Howdy, everyone."

Ernest Holland frowned at his brother. "How in hell did you get in there?"

"The usual way. I dove in." He picked up a towel and started to dry himself.

"That pool was empty," Mark Towers said.

I had to agree. "I just walked over there. No one was in it."

Phil Holland smiled and winked at us. "Then I guess it's my secret, isn't it?" He went off in search of another beer.

"You're his brother," Lydia addressed Ernest. "How'd he do it?"

Holland shrugged. "*Why* is a better question, and I can answer that. He's been trying to top me all his life. I was the older brother and whenever I had something, growing up, he would always try to better it. Sibling rivalry, I suppose. He saw the pool and since he couldn't have one of his own he decided to top me by performing some foolish magic trick. I thought he was over that phase of his adolescence by now."

"Calm down, Ernest," his wife urged. "The food will be ready in ten minutes."

I reached a sudden decision. "That gives me time enough for a quick swim."

Mary was the most surprised of all. "You're going in the pool?"

"Why not? Philip just came out of it."

Sue Holland showed me to a dressing room just inside the house, and I changed quickly into the black bathing trunks I'd brought along. I didn't feel like a swim so much as I felt like solving a mystery. I'd tackled dozens of strange crimes and impossibilities since coming to Northmont fifteen years earlier, but never one involving a swimming pool. Even my memory of a Philo Vance novel from a few years back offered no help, since the method of disap-

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pearing from a pool would not fit the present circumstances. There had to be some sort of opening under the water, and I was intent on finding it.

"Don't stay in too long," Mary cautioned. "The air is still a bit chilly."

I stuck a toe in and decided it wasn't too bad. Then I walked in the shallow end and started swimming, using a conventional breast stroke. The water was about a foot below the tile edge of the pool, and I saw nothing unusual there. Some of the others had come over to watch me as I did a quick dive under water and inspected the sides and bottom. Never good at holding my breath under water, I surfaced in less than a minute and waved to Mary. With a deep breath I went down again, but still I found nothing. The painted walls of the swimming pool betrayed not a crack. There was no secret entrance to Holland's swimming pool.

I swam to the shallow end and walked up the steps to join the others. Mary handed me a fresh towel to dry myself. "Find anything?"

"Not a thing."

"He must have been there all the time. You couldn't see him because the water distorted your view."

I shook my head. "We were all seated out here, facing the pool, for twenty minutes or more. There was no turbulence. No one was swimming. His head never broke the surface. And he certainly wasn't wearing a diving suit. In fact he was wearing nothing but bathing trunks. Either he can breathe under water or he materialized in this pool by magic."

Inside, the word of Phil Holland's swimming pool trick—if it was a trick—had spread to the others. Still in his bathing trunks, with a towel wrapped around his middle, he stood sipping his beer and turning aside all questions. "Do it again so we can all see it," Rose Innes suggested. She was the newspaper's cooking expert, a jolly overweight woman who shared an office with Lydia Mayer.

Phil Holland smirked slightly, enjoying his moment of glory, and asked, "What do you think, big brother—should I do it again?"

"Why don't you do the reverse?" Ernest suggested. "Dive into the pool and disappear." There was a touch of nastiness in his tone.

"Well, I could do that too."

Everyone started talking at once, believing Ernest's challenge had been sincere. I walked over to Sue Holland who was making herself another Tom Collins. "I think you'd better rescue your hus-

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band. This swimming pool business with Phil seems to be getting out of hand."

"Things with my brother-in-law always get out of hand," she agreed. Then, raising her voice for all to hear, she announced, "It's clambake time! Everybody outside!"

The caterers had set up tables for the twenty guests out beyond the pool. As we strolled out, Sue Holland explained that two hundred soft-shell clams had been baked on hot rocks in a sand pit, along with four dozen ears of corn, five broiling chickens, ten sweet potatoes, and twenty lobsters. They had been layered with four bushels of wet seaweed supplied by the chef. As soon as the clams had opened they were ready to serve.

I sat with Mary, something of a clam expert, who immediately announced, "These are great!" The others seemed to be enjoying the feast as well, though I noticed that Phil Holland had not yet sat down. In fact he had removed his towel and was strolling around in his bathing trunks, chatting with people while he finished his beer.

"Going swimming again?" Towers asked him.

"You bet your life! That's why I'm not eating. Brother Ernest has challenged me to jump into the pool and disappear, and that's just what I'm going to do."

"It wasn't exactly a challenge," Ernest called out from his table. Next to him, Sue raised her glass to her lips and tried to ignore the whole thing. A waiter was serving beer from a pitcher but she waved him away, preferring to stick with her Tom Collins.

The beer tasted good to me. I was about to comment that the entire clambake was one of the best meals I'd had in years when Phil finished his beer and set down the empty glass. Then he strode deliberately to the edge of the swimming pool and dove into the deep end.

For a moment no one moved, waiting for him to resurface.

Holland kept eating, trying to ignore his brother's scene-stealing performance, but after about two minutes Sue grew restless at his side. The water in the pool was completely still and from our limited vantage point at the tables no head had broken the surface. She stood up, and I followed suit. That was the signal for a half-dozen others to start for the pool, and in a moment only Ernest Holland remained at the tables.

Sue was still carrying her drink as she approached the pool, perhaps trying to appear as nonchalant as possible. I was by her side and Rose Innes was right behind us, leading the others. They all

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wanted to see if Holland's brother had performed a miracle before their eyes and vanished from the pool.

I took a deep breath and peered over the edge.

Philip Holland hadn't vanished.

He was lying at the bottom of the pool, face down, arms and legs stretched out like some giant starfish.

Sue Holland dropped her glass and would have fallen after it into the pool if I hadn't caught her. "Mary!" I shouted. "Take care of her. She's fainted."

I was still in my swimsuit and I knew it was my job to go in after him. I dove off the side and went straight to the bottom, trying to get an arm around him. He'd been in the water about four minutes by my estimation and I knew there was a tiny chance he still might live if I could get him to the surface in time. His body weighed less under water, but I was still having trouble getting him up when Mark Towers joined me. He'd doffed his shoes and shirt and followed me into the pool. Between us, we managed to lift Phil Holland's limp body to the tiles. Several people immediately started working on him, to no avail.

I climbed out of the pool and went to find Mary. "You'd better phone for an ambulance. There may be some hope."

"I just did. And I called Sheriff Lens too."

We went back to the pool where Ernest Holland, ashen-faced, had finally joined the group around his brother. Mark Towers was in the pool retrieving a shoe that he'd dropped, along with the glass and straw that had fallen from Sue Holland's hand as she went into a faint. Sue herself was seated on one of the chairs, holding her head in her hands.

I went up to her and asked, "Are you all right? I have some smelling salts in my bag."

"I just can't think," she responded, shaking her head to clear it. "What happened? Is Phil—?"

"They're working on him. It doesn't look good."

"Oh my God!"

Finally I went over and knelt by the body, checking for pulse and breathing. There was nothing. He was dead.

"Do you think it was a heart attack?" Mary Best asked. "What else would have been that sudden?"

"I don't know. We'll have to wait for the autopsy."

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Sheriff Lens arrived just after the ambulance. He'd been at home when the call came in, and pinned his badge to a blue sport shirt he'd been wearing. "Hello, Doc," he greeted me. "Are you a guest or did they call you?"

"A guest. I'm Ernest Holland's physician. The dead man is his younger brother Philip who's been visiting from California. He dove into the pool as part of a stunt and never came up. We had him out within minutes but he was already dead."

The sheriff glanced over at the tables heaped with food. "You think it was cramps after eating?"

"He had nothing but a beer or two. And it was too fast for cramps. He didn't struggle or thrash around at all."

Ernest Holland came over to where we were standing. "I don't understand any of this, Sheriff. My brother was in perfect health." He seemed more annoyed than despondent over his brother's death, as if Phil had managed to top him one last time.

"We'll get to the bottom of it," Sheriff Lens assured him. "I'll be talking to you shortly." As he walked away from Holland he said, "Fill me in, Doc. Who's here and what happened?"

"His annual clambake. Twenty guests in all. There's Holland and his wife Sue, Mary and me, three of his people from the newspaper—Mark Towers, Rose Innes, and Lydia Mayer—and the victim, of course. The other twelve are a couple more employees plus people like me that he deals with in town. You probably know the minister. There are a half-dozen catering people, including the chef. That's it."

"Think he might have been poisoned?"

"I don't see how. It looks like a drowning to me, except that it happened so fast." I quickly ran over all that had happened since Mary and I arrived.

"Sounds like there was no love lost between the brothers."

"Don't read too much into that, Sheriff," I advised. "Certainly there was sibling rivalry, but that's nothing unusual."

Since the death appeared to be natural or accidental, the sheriff limited himself to talking with Holland and his wife, along with Mark Towers and myself because we were the ones who'd gone in after the body. The clambake itself had come to an abrupt end and the others were departing as quickly as they could.

"You can give me a complete guest list if I need it?" Sheriff Lens asked Sue Holland.

"Certainly, but why would you need it?"

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"We won't know till after the autopsy," he answered. It was not a reply designed to make anyone sleep better that night.

Before I left I walked over to the swimming pool and stared into its glistening water. How had Phil Holland planned to disappear from there? The same way that he'd appeared earlier? And what had kept him from it? What had been waiting there, invisible, just beneath the surface?

I'd expected to sleep late on Sunday morning, but it was not to be. After assuring me it would be Monday before he had the autopsy results, Sheriff Lens was at my door before ten o'clock. "Sorry to bother you this early on a Sunday, Doc, but I need you to come along to the Hollands' house. We're pretty certain Philip Holland died from potassium cyanide poisoning."

"That's impossible!" was my first reaction. "If the poison was in the beer he'd have been dead before he reached the pool. It kills within a minute or so. I've handled enough poisoning cases to know that."

"Hell, Doc, maybe the whole pool was poisoned."

I knew he wasn't serious, but I still had to point out that Towers and I had both been in it immediately after Holland was stricken. "There was nothing wrong with the water."

"Why don't you get dressed and come along with me to the Holland home? I need you, Doc."

"Let me grab a quick breakfast and I will."

Sheriff Lens nodded. "Pour some coffee for me too."

We arrived there shortly after eleven to find that the minister, Dr. Fredricks, had driven over to visit them following his Sunday morning service. Fredricks was a kindly white-haired man who looked more at home in his preacher's black suit than he had in his more casual clambake wear the previous day.

He greeted us as we entered and shook our hands. "I came over to help with the funeral arrangements. It's a very trying time for everyone. Such a terrible accident—"

The sheriff interrupted him. "I'm afraid it wasn't an accident. The preliminary autopsy results indicate Mr. Holland died of potassium cyanide poisoning."

The dead man's brother frowned at the news. "How is that possible?"

"We don't know."

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"There must be some mistake," Sue Holland suggested. She wore a green housecoat wrapped around her trim figure. Obviously the minister had surprised them with his visit. "Isn't that the poison you can smell?"

"The odor of bitter almonds, usually," the sheriff agreed, "but being in the water like that might have washed away some of the odor."

"Was there any water in my brother's lungs?" Ernest asked.

"A small amount. He might have been gasping for breath as he died."

"God!" Sue Holland said, looking away.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I know it's hard news to accept."

"We've decided the funeral will be Tuesday morning," Ernest announced. "Dr. Fredricks will hold the service at his church." By concentrating on the funeral he seemed to be avoiding the fact of his brother's death.

Sheriff Lens looked uncomfortable. "I'll need to speak with you in private, Mr. Holland. And Mrs. Holland as well."

Ernest stood up and started to pace. He was wearing a white shirt and trousers, further along in dressing than his wife, but still in bedroom slippers. "There's no need for an extensive investigation, Sheriff. It's obvious my brother poisoned himself."

"Suicide?" I said. Somehow I hadn't considered the possibility.

"He spent his life trying to top me. I was always the older brother he needed to best in one way or another. I was almost glad when he put a continent between us and moved to California. This visit was a disaster from the beginning." He turned to his wife for her agreement. "Wasn't it, Sue?"

"It wasn't good," she admitted quietly.

"He'd become even more of an ass than I remembered. Everything about my success was reason for a sarcastic remark—the newspaper, this house, even my swimming pool. He remembered that I'd always wanted one since I read *Gatsby*."

"The swimming pool," I repeated. "Tell us about the swimming pool."

Dr. Fredricks had gotten to his feet. "If there's nothing more for me to do, I really must be going. Again, Ernest and Sue, my sincere sympathy in your time of sorrow. I'll be at the funeral parlor tomorrow evening, and we've scheduled the service for Tuesday." He nodded to the sheriff and me as he left.

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"It was nice of him to come over," Sue Holland observed. "We don't attend church that often, but of course he was at the clambake when it happened."

I took up the conversation again. "That's what we're trying to determine—exactly what happened at the swimming pool." I held up a finger. "First, a group of us was sitting there chatting, talking about Hitler and Mussolini as I remember it. I'd even walked over to look at the pool. There was no movement in the water, no one breaking the surface to breathe, and I saw no one under the water. The pool was empty. A few minutes later, Phil Holland emerged from the water, virtually challenging us to figure out where he'd come from. I even went for a swim myself to examine the walls of the pool. There was no hiding place, no secret entrance."

"Of course not!" Holland agreed. "It's just a swimming pool!"

I held up another finger. "Second, your brother is challenged by you to reverse the trick, to jump into the pool and disappear."

"I wanted him to disappear, all right—all the way back to California!"

"Ernest—" Sue rested a calming hand on his arm.

"He was willing to do that. Our problem is, how did he work the first trick and how did he plan to work the second one?"

"He could jump in the pool and disappear by dying," Ernest Holland said. "I think that's just what he did. He topped me one last time by killing himself at my clambake."

"Ernest, that's insane!" Sue objected.

"Maybe he was insane."

"I don't mean him, I mean you, for even thinking such a thing."

Sheriff Lens shifted nervously in his chair. "Mr. Holland, if your brother killed himself, how do you figure he pulled it off? Potassium cyanide kills within a minute or two. He had nothing but the beer and it couldn't have been that or you'd have seen the symptoms before he dove in."

"He might have had a capsule of some sort in his mouth," Holland speculated. "Something he could bite into once he was in the water."

Sheriff Lens turned to me. "Are there such things, Doc?"

"Gelatin capsules aren't widely used, but they can be made up. I suppose someone could put poison inside. But he would have had to plan in advance and bring it with him. Somehow he didn't seem like a man planning suicide."

"It's either suicide or the entire pool was poisoned," Ernest Holland said. "What other possibility is there?"

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"I don't know," I admitted.

The idea of a poisoned pool was ridiculous, of course. A small amount of poison, or even a gallon of it, would be diluted so much as to be harmless. Also there was the undeniable fact that Towers and I had suffered no ill effects from our time in the pool. I explained all this to the sheriff as we drove back to my modest house.

"Then what do you think, Doc? Suicide?"

"I don't know. Suicide doesn't explain how Phil Holland could magically appear in the empty pool earlier."

Sheriff Lens had followed my reasoning for too many years to be left behind now. "You think the two things are connected, don't you, Doc? He was going to vanish from the pool the same way he got into it in the first place. Only something or someone stopped him."

"Maybe."

"You've solved tougher cases than this. You'll figure it out."

But after the sheriff had dropped me back home and I'd had time to think about it, I wondered if I had ever solved a tougher case than this.

Holland had been hoping his brother's body would be released early Sunday afternoon so there'd be time to embalm it for viewing Sunday evening. But it wasn't to be, and Monday afternoon and evening would be the only calling times. It didn't really matter, Sue told me later when I phoned, because Phil had no friends in Northmont. As for his life in California, he'd been something of a playboy, working around the fringes of the film industry and romancing a few starlets, but never settling down. She'd phoned his most recent female friend, who'd shed a few tears at the news of his death but suggested he be buried back East.

"I'd like to speak with some of the people on the *Blade,*" I told Sue. "Will they be getting out an issue this week?"

"Certainly," she assured me. "Ernest won't be in the office until after Tuesday's funeral, but Mark Towers will get out the issue. It'll go to press Thursday evening just as it always does."

"I noticed Lydia Mayer taking some photographs at the clambake. Were those for the paper?"

"I think she plans to use one or two in her column."

"If I stopped by the office tomorrow morning, would she have prints of them yet?"

"Oh yes. We have our own darkroom and Lydia develops all her own things right in the office."

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"I'd like to see them, in case she caught something I missed."

"Of course," Sue Holland said. "Does this mean you don't believe my husband's suicide theory?"

"I don't know what to believe, frankly. How's he taking it?"

"He's resting right now. For all his bluster, it's still a shock to see a brother die before your eyes."

I believed her.

I phoned Mary at the office Monday morning and told her I'd be late. I knew there were no patients due until eleven. Then I went over to the town square, where the *Blade* office was right next to Dr. Fredricks's church. The small staff was bustling around like, I supposed, any other Monday. Mark Towers was all business now, and with the telephone cradled between chin and shoulder as he wrote furiously he bore little resemblance to the man who'd been directing us where to park on Saturday. The only reminder was the Cuban cigar smoldering in his ashtray.

He hung up the phone as I passed his desk. "Hello, Doc. I hear Phil was poisoned."

"That's what the autopsy says."

"Is this one of these impossible crimes you like to solve?"

"I like to solve them," I agreed. "It's too soon to tell just what this is. I came in to look at the pictures Lydia Mayer took on Saturday."

"Lydia!" he called out.

She appeared from the back room, carrying a stack of papers, and I explained what I wanted. "Sure, Dr. Sam. I have the pictures back on my desk. Because of what happened we decided not to run a social column on the party. We're just reporting Philip Holland's death as a news item."

I followed her into the little office she shared with Rose Innes. Each of them had a big Underwood typewriter by her desk, and Rose was in the process of cutting a piece from a large chocolate cake. "You're just in time to help test this recipe," she told me. "It's kirsch-flavored Black Forest cake with cream filling and sour cherries."

"Sounds much too rich for my diet," I told her. "Thanks anyway."

Lydia snorted. "Can you imagine sharing an office with Rose and her recipes all day?" She rummaged through the papers on her desk and came up with a folder of the pictures she'd taken on Saturday.

They were the usual black-and-white prints of passable quality, showing groups of people, drinks in hand, standing and seated. Some had been taken in the pool area and there was the one of Philip

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Holland in his bathing suit that she'd taken just after she arrived. None of the snapshots told me anything new. I put them back in the folder and returned it to her.

Rose took her cake to pass around to Towers and the other employees, and I used the opportunity to ask Lydia a few questions. "You've been here a long time, haven't you?"

"Ever since Ernest started the paper. I was one of his first employees."

"Wasn't Philip living back East then?"

She nodded. "In Boston. He never had quite the resolve of Ernest. Too busy being a playboy. I suppose it happened to lots of people who came of age during prohibition. Phil was the one with the hip flask and the girl on his arm. He watched big brother marry a perfect woman and start a weekly newspaper. I think when Ernest started building the big house and fancy pool that was more than his brother could stomach. He headed for California."

"Why did he come back?"

Lydia Mayer shrugged. "A visit. I know Mark thought he was angling to become editor of the paper, somehow talking his brother into replacing Mark with him, but that would never have happened. I told Mark that Ernest would never hire his brother for anything."

"No love lost between the two."

"No," she agreed, then looked sharply at me. "Ernest wouldn't kill him, if that's what you're thinking. Not his own brother."

"The thought never crossed my mind. How long had Phil been staying with them?"

"Since around Labor Day. He spoke of going back, but I don't think he ever mentioned a date."

Rose Innes came back with her cake. Only one piece remained. "Just enough for you, Dr. Sam."

I smiled at her. "No thanks, Rose."

"Well, I guess I'll have to eat it myself."

I didn't go to the funeral parlor that evening, but I was in church with Sheriff Lens the following morning for Dr. Fredricks's service. A number of business people, advertisers in the *Blade,* were in attendance, as well as the newspaper staff who had come from the office next door. After the service we followed along to the cemetery and stood back a ways as Ernest Holland's brother was buried.

"What do you think, Doc?" the sheriff asked as we strode back to the car. "Do you know how he was killed?"

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"The first trick is the key to the mystery. If we knew how he managed to emerge from that empty pool, we'd know the rest." I was silent, deep in my own thoughts, until we reached the center of town. "I want to go out there later today, Sheriff. I want to see the pool one more time."

"Take a swim," he suggested. "It's warm enough for it."

"I've had my swim."

"The poisoned pool," he mused. "Do you think he had some chemical on his skin that reacted with the water?"

I chuckled. "That's not too likely. For one thing, it would have killed him the first time he was in the water. Nothing was rubbed on his skin after he came out except a towel. Any sort of chemical on his skin would more likely have been washed away."

"Could someone have injected him with a hypodermic just before he jumped in?"

"The autopsy didn't find any needle marks. Besides, Holland would certainly have reacted to being stuck with a hypodermic needle before diving into the pool. No, the poison was almost certainly ingested. As soon as it hit the stomach acids he was a dead man."

"He'd only been here a few weeks. That's awfully soon to make an enemy who would kill him."

"Most of the people at the party had known him earlier, and some of them might have had reason to fear his return."

"I think I'd better go out there with you later," Sheriff Lens decided.

We arrived in mid-afternoon and found Sue Holland swimming in the pool. As she climbed out, clad in a dark green bathing suit that showed off her perfect legs, she greeted us and said, "Nobody's been in since it happened Saturday. Ernest wouldn't come near it. I figured somebody had to go in, just to prove it wasn't jinxed or something."

"Is your husband around?"

She glanced from Sheriff Lens to me. "He's in the living room with Mark. Come on, I'll take you in."

We entered through the side door, and I was surprised how big the place looked when not crowded with guests and caterers. Holland and his editor were bent over a coffee table studying typed stories for the week's paper. Even on the day of his brother's funeral, Ernest Holland was still in charge at the *Blade*.

"Sorry to interrupt," I told them. "The sheriff and I wanted another look at the pool area."

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"Go right ahead. Sue will take care of you." Holland's gaze returned to the pages before him as he made a point with Mark Towers.

His wife was making herself a drink behind the bar. "He doesn't seem too concerned about his brother," the sheriff commented.

"They weren't close," she remarked, lifting the glass to her lips. "But you already know that."

I turned suddenly and walked out to the pool. It had come to me so quickly that I couldn't completely trust my intuition. I had to think it out. I had to be sure. Staring down at the barely moving water of the swimming pool, I knew I was right.

I walked back into the living room and Sue Holland was staring at me. "What's wrong? You look so strange."

I moistened my lips slightly. "I know how Phil Holland was killed. And I know who did it."

"You can't mean that."

"Yes I can. It came to me just now when I saw you lift that glass to your lips. I remembered you doing that at the clambake while we were eating, sipping the Tom Collins you'd been drinking through a straw earlier."

Towers and her husband had stopped talking and were turned in our direction. Sheriff Lens shifted uncomfortably, not knowing what to expect. "After Philip died, Mark retrieved your glass and straw from the pool. But you weren't using a straw at dinner, so where did it come from? How did it get into the pool?"

She grabbed for something beneath the bar and ran for the back door. I was after her in an instant. I caught her around the waist as she reached the edge of the pool, twisting the tiny vial of white powder from her grasp.

"Not that way," I gasped, yanking her back. "That's the way you murdered Philip Holland."

All the time it took me to explain it, Ernest Holland's expression never changed. He sat there on the sofa, staring straight ahead. Perhaps he was remembering the pain he had caused Philip as a child, or the pain Philip had caused him as an adult.

"You see, it all hinged on how Philip pulled off that pool trick in the first place. When I realized Sue wasn't using a straw any longer when she dropped the glass in the pool, I asked myself—as I asked her just now—where it came from. We saw Mark retrieve the glass and straw, so they were floating on the surface before he dove in. I

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certainly didn't have a straw when I dove after Philip, so he must have had the straw with him all the time. When he died it floated to the surface. And what does a straw suggest if you're in the water? Any boy can tell you it's a breathing device. You can remain submerged and breathe through the straw without being seen. That's just what Philip did. When we came out to sit around the pool he was already in it, standing near the shallow end so his head was just below the surface of the water. He was up against the near side of the pool, breathing through the straw that just broke the surface of the water. We couldn't see him from where we sat, and even when I walked over to look in I didn't see him. He was flat against the pool wall, and with that little lip of tile going out a couple of inches over the water, it helped to hide him. I would have had to lean over and look straight down into the water, which I had no reason to do. In fact, I remember standing back from the edge."

"He was only wearing bathing trunks," Mark Towers pointed out. "Why didn't we see the straw?"

"He slipped it under the waistband of his trunks, I imagine. It might have gotten flattened a little but it was still usable for his purpose."

Sheriff Lens had been waiting while Sue Holland dressed. Now he brought her out. Ernest was shocked to see her in handcuffs, and he half rose from his seat. "Is that necessary, Sheriff?"

"She just tried to kill herself at the pool, Mr. Holland. We don't want that, do we?"

"Of course not," he agreed. He didn't meet his wife's eyes.

"This was all to steal attention from his brother," I went on. "A childish thing, but perhaps all this has its roots in childhood. Certainly when Philip was challenged to vanish from the pool he had to try it, even though he knew his method would be revealed. It's one thing to step out of a swimming pool believed to be empty, which hasn't been thoroughly examined. It's something else to dive into a pool and try to remain hidden, breathing through a straw. One of us would surely have peered over the edge, or walked around to the other side and spotted him at once. He'd lose that round, but he was prepared to top his brother in another way, wasn't he, Sue?"

She turned toward me. "You seem to know it all."

"He asked you for a second straw to hide in the waistband of his trunks. Only this time you gave him one containing potassium cyanide, the water-soluble powder moistened just enough to make it stick inside the straw. He dove into the pool, stood against the

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near side under water, poked the straw above the surface, and took a deep breath. He was dead within a minute."

"Why would she do it, Doc?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"Why would he ask her for a straw to do a trick that would steal the spotlight from her husband's party? Why did she fear what he was going to do next? I believe she and Philip had an affair years ago when he was living here, and he was about to gloat about this to Ernest. Sue couldn't risk losing everything because Philip wanted to embarrass her husband. She was willing to kill him rather than lose Ernest and this house and everything else. Isn't that right, Sue?"

She stared at me and at the sheriff. She didn't look at her husband. "I won't talk here. I'll make a statement at your office, Sheriff."

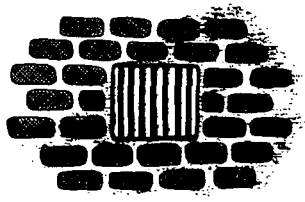
"The drinking straw was the key to it," I finished up. "If the straw was found floating in the pool with his body, she knew the truth might come out. That's why she faked a near-faint and dropped her glass in the water. We'd assume the straw had been in the glass as it was earlier."

Mark Towers spoke for the first time. "Where'd she get the poison?"

"Potassium cyanide is used in photography. Your darkroom at the newspaper probably has some. She just needed to transfer a little to that vial she had. That could have been done sometime when she dropped in to see her husband. I don't know why she took it originally, but she found a use for it."

Her story, when she finally told it to Sheriff Lens, was that she'd taken the poison to kill some moles that had been digging up the yard. She'd placed it in the straws for this purpose, and when Philip Holland asked her for a straw to perform his pool trick she'd accidentally given him a poisoned one.

I doubted if there was a jury in the entire state that would buy this explanation, even from a woman as attractive as Sue Holland.



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Tom Tolnay's stories have appeared in a variety of national magazines, including The Saturday Evening Post *and our sister publication* Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine. *His latest novel,* The Big House, *was published by Walker and Company in 1992. He joins us for the first time with a tale set on stormy seas . . .*

THE FINE LINE

by TOM TOLNAY

Dahlia and Mitchell Evans had boarded the *Northern Princess* at Bar Harbor, Maine, and set sail for Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, in deathlike silence. A cold fog and sharp rain were sailing with them, and the murky waters of the Bay of Fundy lashed the ship as fiercely as they had flung words at each other on the drive up from Boston.

Both had wanted to turn back, but the passage and accommodations had been arranged, woolen clothing purchased, and the week set aside at their respective employments—his as a draftsman in Boston's department of public works, hers as an attorney with a prestigious firm that soon would add her name to its list of partners. But the most important reason neither of them backed off was that such a reversal would surely have been used against the other in future confrontations.

Icy darts of rain drove even those who romanticized storms at sea off the unsheltered decks and into the passenger waiting room, which was dank with wet wool and human perspiration, or into a snack bar fouled by the odor of overused frying oil. A few of the passengers, including the grim Boston couple, found their way below to the ship's bar, a low-beamed, square enclosure paneled in dark walnut.

It was the scotch that finally loosened their tongues. Perched on bolted-down stools, they were a few sips into their second drinks when Mitchell declared: "Typical—we take a holiday to encourage communication between us and you don't say a word for hours."

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"You're not exactly running off at the mouth either," Dahlia said in a rush, freed from the restraints of silence.

"I'm talking now, aren't I?"

"Let's face it. A trip to Nova Scotia or anywhere else won't help us agree on anything, not with your aggressive attitude."

By taking a mouthful of Cutty Sark, Mitchell managed to avoid peering at Dahlia's thin penciled eyebrows, the perfectly revised nose, the sharp-looking white teeth. Am I really being aggressive? he wondered, staring into the mirror behind the bar: Broad smudges of gray had emerged at his temples; his lips were drawn tight; his eyelids were wrinkled. All part of Dahlia's legacy, he thought.

"Why are you purposely trying to undermine your own daughter's future?" Dahlia said, resurrecting the conflict that had driven them into silence earlier that day.

"It's what Penny wants that counts—not what you want," he sneered, annoyed that he'd allowed himself to be drawn into this argument again.

"For once in your life I'd like to see you take some progressive action on behalf of your daughter."

"Penny's happier going to school outside the city," he said, neglecting to mention that he was happier to have his daughter out from under his wife's daily influence.

"If it were left to you, Penny would end up in some meaningless job, without a bona fide career."

"She's only fourteen years old. There's plenty of time for all that."

"The time to plan is *now*."

"My daughter's staying where she is!" he exploded, causing the white-haired couple on the stools beside them to glance in their direction.

"A private school in Boston could do so much more for her," Dahlia persisted.

"For your image, you mean."

"We certainly don't need another municipal employee in the family."

The comment stung Mitchell. But with eight hours of confinement to the ship still ahead of them, rather than get drawn more deeply into the bottomless conflict—at least this soon—he yanked the wallet from the inside pocket of his coat jacket, pinched out a twenty, and slapped it on the bar. Now he dropped off the stool.

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"If you won't take care of the arrangements," Dahlia jeered quietly, "I'll remove her myself and register her at Boston Prep."

Stopping short, he spun toward her. "You'd better *not* try that," he warned, "or you'll have to face the consequences."

"Consequences? Don't make me laugh."

"Would you rather I made you cry?" he spat, his fist clenching involuntarily before he started toward the sliding door.

The rain and wind were thrashing the decks with a metallic clatter. Mitchell pulled on his Irish walking cap and raised the collar of the Harris tweed against his neck, the strands of wet wool irritating his skin. But the cold wetness felt good on his face, making him think he'd been more affected by the liquor than he'd realized. Moving away from the threshold, he dashed under the overhang of the upper deck.

Now he heard the snappy steps that he'd been listening to for fifteen years. Dahlia drew up beside him. The hood of her jacket was drawn loosely around her narrow white face and short black hair, giving her the appearance of a phantom that had materialized out of the elements of the storm. "You can't run away from everything, Mitchell."

The husband stepped out from under the overhang and went past a sign, PASSENGERS NOT PERMITTED BEYOND THIS POINT, and up the slippery treaded stairs.

"Can't you read?" she shouted, climbing up behind him.

Though he knew a direct order would only fuel her stubbornness, he shouted over his shoulder, "Go back to the bar and leave me alone!"

Mitchell stepped onto the upper deck, and Dahlia was right behind him. "This is going to be settled once and for all," she said.

"Penny is *not* leaving Braeside," he snapped.

"I don't mean Penny. I mean all of it."

"Do you suppose our marriage counselor would find these weather conditions suitable to hold a heart-to-heart talk?" Mitchell laughed with bitter sarcasm.

"I mean to settle this here and now, in the wind and rain if necessary. I'm sick to death of the whole mess. I'm sick to death of you."

The upper deck was empty, and the ship's horn was bellowing in the fog. Lightning gashed the skies, instantly followed by a rush of thunder that sounded like a truckload of stones being dumped. With

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long steps Mitchell moved sternward, but Dahlia stayed at his heels, her shorter legs moving rapidly.

"Stand still and listen to me, you selfish fool!" she said loudly, uselessly, into the wind.

Just then the *Northern Princess* dipped sharply to the starboard. With the wind and rain pushing at their backs they went skidding over the slick floor. Suddenly Mitchell realized his wife was bent over the guardrail, and as he reached out to stop her forward motion, she stumbled over the iron crossbar, bouncing like a bundle of laundry onto the overhang below. As helplessly as a leaf in a maelstrom, she rolled with the ship and, screaming into the wind, toppled over the side into the bay.

For a moment Mitchell was stunned into immobility. He peered into the waters, the surface of which looked as if it were being chopped by thousands of invisible axes. There was no sight of her in the frothy, trailing turmoil, and the roar of the storm and the sea overwhelmed the sounds that ripped out of his throat: "Dahlia! Dahlia! Dahlia! Dahlia!"

After several seconds or, as far as he could tell, several minutes of anguish, of being buffeted by the stiff, saturated wind, he heard someone thumping toward him along the ramp. He turned and saw a short, stocky shipman in billed cap and navy peacoat. "My wife!" Mitchell cried, pointing out to sea.

The shipman stopped and squinted at the churning bay. Mitchell noticed that the skin around his sunken eyes was black, as if darkened by all that he had witnessed in his life.

"*Do* something, for God's sake!" the husband cried.

Taking a steady look at the passenger, the shipman strode down the ramp and disappeared into a tin-covered door. Mitchell shivered, realizing his tweed jacket was soaked through to his shirt and the woolen trousers were stuck to his skin.

A bell went off, and the hollow clang! clang! clang! vibrated in Mitchell's bones, signaling the change that suddenly came over him: The initial shock, the despair he'd felt over what had happened to Dahlia, seemed to blow away in a thrust of softer, curiously warmer wind. Though Mitchell could not have harmed his wife physically, now that it had happened at the hands of nature, and once he had expended certain automatic feelings of horror, he couldn't help but think that the seemingly interminable, bitter disagreements between them had been settled once and for all, and entirely in his

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favor. It was as if he'd been on trial for fifteen years and had unexpectedly been acquitted of all charges.

The shipman in the peacoat appeared on the overhang below, and he was surrounded by a band of crewmen in black rubber rain gear. Slick and gleaming, and huddled close together, they didn't look like a half-dozen individuals so much as parts of one great sea monster that had just climbed, dripping, out of the bay. Now the shipman peered over the storm-swept water; then he pointed at the closest of four lifeboats suspended from cables. The crewmen began climbing in.

Slowly the lifeboat was lowered toward the slashing, swallowing seas. The closer the men got to the water, the tighter the grip closed on Mitchell's stomach. He was horrified at the thought that more lives might be lost in the storm. Or perhaps, in some terrible crevice of his subconsciousness, he was horrified by the possibility that they might succeed in extracting Dahlia alive from that cold chaos.

On several occasions Mitchell had been a few words away from crossing the fine line that separated them from divorce, especially when he'd found out about Bill Tobart, his wife's doctor. Having been taught by marriage to be a pragmatist, however, he never allowed himself to forget that divorce courts are prejudiced in the mother's favor. He was determined not to be deprived of his right to raise his daughter. Nor did he care to have most of what he'd worked for go to a woman who had caused him so much heartache. Especially, he wanted to retain control over the two hundred wooded acres in Vermont. It had taken him a year to find the right land—its hills, meadows, ponds, and streams were alive with possibilities. True, the three-room cabin was in very bad shape, but privately he'd dreamed of building a log house up there and seeing Penny, each summer, grow closer to the land and, therefore, closer to her true potential. Dahlia had opposed him on that purchase, but Penny had seemed so excited about the prospect of exploring and camping out on the acreage that he'd gone ahead with it, causing another fierce, extended dispute with his wife. Despite Dahlia's opposition to the acquisition, in the event of a divorce, Mitchell believed, he would be forced to sell the property so that she could get half its value.

Dahlia had hung on to the marriage, too, partly for Penny's sake, but mostly, Mitchell suspected, because she was able to behave as a single woman without giving up the resources and respectability

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of married life. Not to mention the daily ego gratification of appearing to be a successful wife/mother/career woman. The only way to beat her, he had realized long ago, was to outlast her. Now, it seemed, he had. Or had he? The crew of the *Northern Princess* was being lowered in a lifeboat alongside the ship.

The bay was hissing. Overhead the ship's horn was blasting. The wind was surging. Lightning illuminated the fog, each flash etching a fluorescent sketch of the storm against the dirty sky. The lifeboat stopped its descent a few feet above the water. Four men were braced against the belly of the small, rocking craft, their large white eyes glaring to such a degree that they seemed to give off a fearful light. Just then a wave lifted off the surface of the bay and crashed over them, nearly sweeping one of the men away. The others had to leap on the man to save him, the sea streaming down their slick rain gear.

Braced against the lifeboat rack above them, the shipman began waving his arms: "Hoist 'er back up! 'Tis no use. The storm's too deadly. Hoist 'er back up!"

Dahlia's body did not wash up along the coast of Maine or Nova Scotia. It was as if she had not existed at all. But her physical reality was made shockingly clear when Mitchell overheard a sailor speculate on what might've become of her remains somewhere in the deepest waters. Whatever her true fate, the Coast Guard ended its search. However, this did not end the matter. There were questions to be answered, statements to be made to the police, and, in due time, a hearing. The authorities emphasized that it was an effort to gather information, not a trial. But this didn't make it any less unpleasant.

While Mitchell Evans approached the hearing as a formality one must endure in any situation involving the loss of human life, still it seemed an imposition, and his mind dealt with the ordeal by growing more removed with each question they asked. At times he felt as if he were watching the proceedings through a porthole that was being lashed with rain. Once their need for information had been satisfied, however, the storm of words quieted down. Dahlia's death was ruled "a terrible, tragic accident," as Mitchell had known all along, and he was thanked for his patient cooperation. At last the sea of his life became tranquil.

Plans immediately began to flood his thoughts. He wanted to take a week off from work and see if he could get Penny out of school as

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well. Under the circumstances, he didn't anticipate any problems. Together they could drive up to their cabin in the mountains, and on the way they'd have a good opportunity to express their feelings and to begin discussing the future. While in Vermont they could take long hikes to help bury the past, and he might even begin drawing up plans for a house to be built on their property. Maybe I'll quit my job in Boston, he thought, and find work in Montpelier. Suddenly everything seemed possible.

The sky was gray the morning Mitchell drove up to Braeside, and the moment he climbed out of the car, Penny emerged from the stone building that was almost entirely in the clutches of dry ivy. She wore denim slacks and a matching jacket, and she took short, quick steps toward her father, reminding him of the way Dahlia walked. Setting her knapsack down on the slate walk, with sad eyes she greeted and hugged him tightly, grasping a handful of his brown wool sweater. Then she got into the passenger seat of her mother's BMW. Mitchell dropped Penny's knapsack onto the backseat, sat down at the wheel, started the engine, and steered the sedan away from the curb.

During the first fifteen minutes on the road they didn't say much, merely establishing that they'd both had breakfast, that he would try to avoid the heavily traveled turnpike, that rain had been predicted for the weekend. Then they fell silent. Though he was anxious to talk things out, the father found himself reluctant to stir the sadness up out of the low places of his daughter's heart. But Penny saved him the trouble. "I still can't believe it," she said.

The father reached over and gave her cool hand a squeeze. "It's going to take us quite a while to get over this, but we'll have to be strong enough to move on with our lives." Her eyes moist with tears, Penny nodded in agreement.

After another few miles along the road, and after a few more expressions of grief, the father said gently, "Maybe we should consider building a house on the property in Vermont. It might be a good way to get a whole new perspective on life."

Penny's head turned smartly toward her father, causing the gold loops at her ears to tinkle slightly. "It's too far away, Dad."

"But I thought you loved the woods and the life in Vermont."

"I do," sighed Penny. "But I've just started to feel as if I'm getting something out of Braeside."

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"They tell me the high school in the village near our property is top-notch."

"What I mean is that the kids at Braeside are finally beginning to accept me." After a pause, she added: "I have a boyfriend, Dad."

A boyfriend! At fourteen? Yes, of course. A boyfriend. Suddenly he realized that Penny had agreed to come with him to Vermont to help *him* get over the accident. How fine a line there is between child and adult, he thought. Glancing at his daughter, he saw in her the way Dahlia had looked as a girl in photographs—the black hair and pale, pretty face. But he also saw in her the way Dahlia had looked in the past few years—a stiff determination in the set of her eyebrows and jaw. The move to Vermont was not negotiable.

As he wheeled the vehicle up the ramp and onto the highway, heading north, rain began to smear across the windshield, and he clicked on the wipers. Father and daughter rode over the wet tar in silence as the rain pattered on the roof. Mitchell's heart was laden with the realization that he had not only lost Dahlia, for better or worse, he had lost Penny as well: She was growing up before he'd had a chance to take an active role in her life. Now he felt truly alone.

As the rain grew more intense, splattering over the windshield, a flash of lightning stretched out of the sky and the explosion of thunder triggered in his mind the stormy afternoon aboard the *Northern Princess.* Vividly he saw Dahlia and himself on the top deck, arguing, wavering in the storm. Suddenly the ship dipped drastically and they went skidding over the slick floor. Instinctively, attempting to straighten out the ship, he yanked hard on the steering wheel. Penny screamed as the BMW jolted over the curb and sprang down a steep slope. The words "What have I done?" shrieked across his mind, and an instant before the car struck a concrete bridge support, Mitchell Evans saw his arms reaching out to save his wife from falling off the ship, but his hands were against her back as he pushed her over the fine line that separates life from death.

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

The household hints in James Powell's new "White Swan" story are not fictional contrivances. Mr. Powell tells us he has tried the "ants and mint hint," and it works. For the rest, you'll have to rely on your own experimentation . . .

HOUSEHOLD HINTS

by JAMES POWELL

As Dr. Frogmore's brightly painted wagon rumbled out of town Mrs. Kenderdine, her broad cheeks red in the winter air, stood by the roadside waving goodbye to the medicine show's star, that insect prodigy Mr. Humbert Bugg, B.A. The little pest's investigation had, indeed, dispelled her dark misgivings. No, Miss Leeds had not secretly murdered Mrs. Flood and Mrs. Caraby to make herself Mrs. Kenderdine's sole heir. Nor did she intend to kill her benefactress to hurry along that inheritance.

Suddenly Mrs. Kenderdine remembered she'd forgotten to ask the most important question of all. Hoisting her skirts, she ran after the caravan. "Tell me," she demanded breathlessly, coming abreast of the little cage beneath the eaves where Mr. Bugg bounced and swung. "How did you discover my nephew, the doctor, was the villain in the piece?"

The celebrated investigator, who now sported the light blue and dark blue scarf of St. Earwig's College, of which he was a graduate, broke the ice in his ink well, scrawled still another note in tobacco juice, and passed it out through the bars.

" 'The clue of the doc that parked in the night'?" read a puzzled and puffing Mrs. Kenderdine. "But you said the doc didn't park in the night."

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Mr. Bugg jumped in the air and clicked his heels. "Exactly!!!" he wrote, decorating the word with a quiver of exclamation points. "Being a medical man, your nephew found it easy to convince you by mere innuendo that Mrs. Flood's riding accident and Mrs. Caraby's heart attack were not quite what they seemed. By planting these suspicions in your mind, he hoped to implicate Miss Leeds in their deaths. You were then to disinherit her and make him your sole heir again."

"That was, indeed, my intention when my solicitor returned from London tomorrow," admitted the running woman.

"But here Dr. Tavistock Kenderdine overplayed his hand," wrote Mr. Bugg. "He made you so fear for your own life that you talked of going to the police. To forestall this he suggested you hire my services to find solid proof of Miss Leeds's guilt. Like many before him, he thought my caged circumstance would prevent me from thwarting his plan. Meanwhile, to reassure you, he promised to keep Miss Leeds under personal nightly surveillance. But last evening when I made my little excursion with my cage tied howdahlike to your cat Semiramis's back, I discovered the good doctor was not parked across from Miss Leeds's house but at home in bed. How could that be if Miss Leeds was a threat to you and he not yet your heir?"

Mrs. Kenderdine tapped her temple. "My compliments to your little green brain cells," she said, panting heavily. "One last question. Why was my Semiramis so obliging?"

"I promised to teach her a trick," wrote Mr. Bugg. "To stridulate. On her hind legs."

"To walk on her hind legs?" demanded Mrs. Kenderdine.

Mr. Bugg shook his head. "To sing by rubbing her back legs together," he corrected her. "And may her music always remind you of your obedient servant, Humbert Bugg, B.A."

The thought of a stridulating cat made Mrs. Kenderdine laugh so hard she had to stop in her tracks. She stood there in the middle of the road waving at the departing insect, who replied by removing his tall beaver hat and executing a most elegant bow.

Polly MacDougal finished her second cup of coffee of the day, scowled down at the pages of *Godfather Goose Magazine,* and chewed on her lip with thoughtful dissatisfaction. Rereading her latest mystery story for children had not, as she hoped, provided inspiration for her next. Nor was she altogether satisfied with her educated detective,

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Mr. Bugg, whom she had patterned on her husband.

Following his retirement from Simon Cameron University, Wallis MacDougal had acquired a local reputation as a solver of smallish crimes and unraveler of rural enigmas. But like La Fontaine's toad, who puffed himself up to be as big as an ox with explosive consequences, he had recently become obsessed with uncovering what he called "the jewel in the crown of criminal investigation, a case of murder in the first degree."

Polly doubted a small town like White Swan, Pennsylvania, was the place to look for murder in any shape or size. But last night at the dinner table Wallis had looked up from his book and said, "That Donny Heckel kid, you know, the yahoo who disappeared from town last December?"

Polly set aside her crossword puzzle. Until recently young Heckel had been a charter member of the sturdy, scowling, hairy tribe who parked their pickups in front of the local bars. "I heard he got religion and moved out to the Northwest to convert lumberjacks," she said.

"I don't think he left town, at least not alive," said Wallis. "I think his mother murdered him."

Polly's left eyebrow was arcing toward a scoff when she restrained it. After all, her husband's adventures sometimes provided her with the germ of a story. "Ah," she said, "that's why you went along so easily when I volunteered you for the Celebrity Pie Toss tomorrow."

"A chance to size the woman up," said Wallis with a cunning smirk. "And maybe you'll be impressed by my throwing arm. As a young lad I sizzled many a cow pie across home plate out in the pasture with the boys."

Polly blinked and opened her mouth to correct this sizable misapprehension about the pie toss. But before she could, Wallis said, "Let's walk by Mrs. Heckel's after dinner. I'll lay out my suspicions." Then he returned to his book.

Polly knew very little about Mrs. Heckel. But she didn't think anything was going to convince her that the woman had murdered her only child. Mrs. Heckel had taught grade school nearby until her late husband's stroke. In the ten years she'd cared for him the town hadn't seen much of her. Even after he died, she'd kept pretty much to herself. Sometimes in the evening, just about the time the bats and the chimney swifts changed shifts, you might catch a glimpse of her in the twilight, a small figure wearing sunglasses as if to conceal her identity.

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Then this last year, not long after her son's sudden departure, Mrs. Heckel had rejoined the town, becoming active in the Widows' Club which met regularly to exchange recipes and helpful lore. The club sponsored several booths for White Swan Day, tomorrow's street fair, among them the Celebrity Pie Toss which this year was Mrs. Heckel's responsibility. And, talk of beginner's luck, she'd recently won the drawing for the side of beef, cut and wrapped for the freezer, that marked the Grand Opening of the new Eats R Us supermarket.

As they walked through the May night Wallis explained how he had come to suspect Mrs. Heckel of murder. "At first it was odds and ends," he said. "A couple of weeks back I drove over to Combermere. Fellow at the gun shop has this 1840 Leman trade rifle he says he might consider selling. Anyway, while he was finishing up with a customer in came two Donny Heckel clones. One of them was complaining about a shotgun in the shop window. Said it had belonged to Heckel, who'd promised him first bid if he ever decided to sell. Then the other one said hey, yeah, and wasn't it fishy, Donny leaving town that way without collecting his football bets. That left me curious enough to ask the shop owner where he got the shotgun. A little old woman brought it in.

"So I questioned one of my operatives who pays monthly visits to the Heckel household," said Wallis. (Polly knew this would be the newspaper boy, a sharp-eyed Peter Pry, making his collection rounds.) "Not long after Donny disappeared my operative rang Mrs. Heckel's doorbell, and when she peeked out he saw the outline of a forty-five caliber automatic in the hand she pressed up against the window curtain."

"It wouldn't surprise me any if Donny had an automatic," said Polly. "Maybe he left it behind for his mother's protection."

Wallis grunted sceptically. They had reached the iron dart-and-hairpin fence in front of the Heckel house. Wallis nodded at the bed planted with purple, droop-spiked flowers running parallel to the front walk. It was six feet long and three feet wide. At the end nearest the house there was a gray round-shouldered wooden sign buried in the ground with a white goose wearing a red ribbon around its neck. One end of the ribbon spelled out "Welcome" in a cursive script. "And this is why I'm talking premeditation here," said Wallis. "My sources tell me that bed's new. Dug last fall. A whole six weeks before her Donny disappeared. You'd figure tulips, crocuses,

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and daffodils, right? Well, nothing came up this spring. Zip. Last month Mrs. Heckel planted this love-lies-bleeding, something Victorian enough to give you the vapors. Just the thing for a mother to put on her son's grave."

"Maybe that hard frost at the end of November got the bulbs," suggested Polly. Her husband gave another grunt.

As they started for home it didn't seem to Polly that he had much to go on. A flower bed roughly the shape of a grave and decorated with a welcome sign that looked something like a tombstone. A vanished son. A mother living alone who keeps an automatic for protection. No, not very much at all.

"Oh, and here's something I'd find interesting if I could work it in," said Wallis as they passed the town square. "A few weeks ago I was sniffing around out back on garbage day. Among Mrs. Heckel's recyclable stuff were four bundles of newspaper maybe two feet thick tied up with twine. Dampish newspapers. Damp all the way through. And it hadn't rained for a week." He raised an index finger. "And there wasn't a paper in the whole lot dated later than last November. Interesting, right?"

"If you can work it in," said Polly. "And while you're at it, come up with a motive."

The dull clunk of the cowbell over the outer door announced an early morning visitor to the antique shop. Putting *Godfather Goose Magazine* aside, Polly went to investigate and found Charmaine Rutt in a smart business suit and a bright silk scarf. Charmaine, whose husband traveled a lot on business, was one of the younger women active in the Widows' Club auxiliary, the Widows-in-Waiting as they liked to call themselves. She planned on getting back into the work force when her youngest, a junior, graduated from high school. To hone her management skills she had taken charge of the Widows' Club cookbook. The number of women she'd co-opted into helping her suggested it was something of a drill in delegating authority. She was also, Polly suddenly remembered, Mrs. Heckel's neighbor.

"Fresh from the printer," said Charmaine, handing over a spiral-bound volume. "I wanted to deliver your copy personally. Many thanks for the help with the copyediting."

When she and her visitor had settled in over coffee, Polly led the conversation around to the Celebrity Pie Toss booth so she could say, "Speaking of Mrs. Heckel, how's she getting on since . . ."

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" . . . since Donny left?" added Charmaine. She frowned and shook her head. "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"Look," said Polly quickly and earnestly, "I'm not trying to stick my nose where it doesn't belong. But clue me in. Maybe I can keep my husband from making a fool of himself and save Mrs. Heckel a lot of embarrassment."

Charmaine considered Polly's words for a moment. Then, making up her mind, she said, "Remember the mint and the ants?"

"Aesop?" asked Polly.

"In the Household Hints." Charmaine was referring to those little bits of information that served as filler between recipes in the cookbook. Some were useful, like how to get rid of little brown ants in your kitchen by filling cracks with dried mints. Others, like "Never combine okra and filé gumbo in the same dish for together they can thicken the blood, often with fatal consequences," were more cautionary.

"Good ones were hard to come by," continued Charmaine. "Somebody'd told me mint would keep ants away and since I had a good supply of both in my kitchen I gave it a try. When the damn stuff worked I got so excited I thought I'd explode if I didn't tell somebody. So I hustled next door, but Mrs. Landis had taken Roxy her Pom to the vet. And Mrs. Dale on the other side now bags out at Eats R Us two days a week. Just then out comes Donny Heckel, slamming his front door and the door to his truck, and off he roars. Well, I thought to myself, why not tell Mrs. Heckel? So I crossed the street and went around and knocked on her kitchen door. I heard a voice. I thought it said, 'Come in,' so I did.

"Mrs. Heckel was at the kitchen table, crying," said Charmaine. "When she saw me she covered her face with her hands. But I saw the swollen upper lip and the blood on her chin. As I crossed to the refrigerator for ice I thought she said, 'Please. . . ,' like she didn't want my help. But she was telling me to use peas, the bag of frozen peas in the freezer. So I got a dishtowel and wrapped the peas in that. 'Peas don't have edges like ice cubes,' she said in the sad voice of experience as she held the towel to her lip. She had an old shiner under one eye and other marks of past battering. She saw me looking and turned her head away and started to speak. 'Don't try telling me you fell down,' I said. 'I saw him leave.'

"Well, she must have needed to talk the way it all came spilling out. He'd been knocking her around pretty regularly. That morning she'd walked in on him going through her purse. I remember she

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said, 'My child who laughed at a piece of sunshine on the linoleum grew up into the little boy who pulls the wings off flies.' I told her, go to the police. But she said no, she was too ashamed. I could see that was part of it. But she was afraid of him, too.

"I guess the whole business sort of made us friends. I used to drop by when Donny wasn't around. And I kept on her to throw the bum out. Mrs. Heckel said she had a plan. I guess it worked. He's gone."

Charmaine stood up and shook herself briskly to return to a businesslike mode. "I like to think I helped her over a tough time," she said. "And she surely came in handy in the Household Hints department, like the one about the peas and how if your freezer's low you can save on electricity by sticking in bundles of old newspapers."

Wallis came down the stairs dressed for the Celebrity Pie Toss in jacket and tie. "Not that tie," said Polly.

Wallis started dutifully back up the steps. But he paused halfway. "I thought you liked this tie."

"I do," she said, sending Wallis off scratching his head. A few minutes later as they set off for the center of town, Polly said grimly, "Well, I've got your motive and then some." Then she repeated what Charmaine had told her, adding, "If Mrs. Heckel killed him he's no great loss."

Wallis gave her a disappointed look. "Murder is murder," he informed her.

Market Street had been closed to traffic for the big day. Country crafts of the pine and ruffled sort were being set out for sale on either sidewalk, much of it looking as though it had been made while the craftsperson was watching television. The funnel cake man sat in his parked step-van brooding over the newspaper headlines and waiting for customers. The smell of hot dogs and sauerkraut defied the early hour. At the Civil War encampment in front of the borough hall, men in blue uniforms squatted down on their haunches drinking coffee out of tin cups and dreamed fondly of miniballs and bayonet charges. And there frolicked Goody Gumdrops the Clown (a.k.a. Mrs. Lowell W. Black, Jr.), red nose, bloody grin, and paint-colored outfit looking for innocent children to terrorize.

A small crowd was waiting at the Celebrity Pie Toss booth where everything was in readiness: spray cans of Mr. Meringue, paper plates, the Polaroid camera (for those prepared to fork out an extra three dollars for a souvenir of their celebrity after the fact), rolls of paper towels to undo the damage done, and, last but not least, the

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canvas target with the cut-out just larger than a human face where the bull's-eye should have been. Polly watched Wallis's jaw sag as he realized he'd be the catcher, not the pitcher, in the event.

Mrs. Heckel turned the booth over to little gray-haired Mrs. Haverstick and came out to greet them with a lively smile. "People have already stopped to ask when you'll be gracing us with your presence, Mr. MacDougal. You're more popular than Mr. Mayor and running neck and neck with Principal Tully. But of course he has the teen crowd behind him a hundred percent. I've scheduled you right after Officer Darnley there." She gestured toward the policeman, who had just arrived wearing his second best uniform.

Wallis preferred to change the subject. "Mrs. Heckel," he said, "may we ask you a few questions about your son? For starters, let me say we know how he's been treating you."

The woman's expression faltered. Then she stuck out her chin defiantly. "Donny went away," she said. "And won't be back." Polly and Wallis waited, leaving her words to float in the air, unminced and much in need of adornment. From the pie toss behind them came the splat of meringue and crowd noises suggesting a direct hit. Finally Mrs. Heckel said, "All right. Here goes." She gestured them into a doorway out of the pedestrian traffic and told her story.

One night last December her son had come home so drunk he collapsed at the foot of the stairs hugging the banister. Mrs. Heckel had manhandled him into her husband's old wheelchair, which she'd already brought down from the attic for just that purpose. Then she'd tied him into it with web belts at the elbows and wrists and ankles and waist and wheeled him into the downstairs bathroom, which she'd chosen because it was windowless and the tile floor would be easiest for cleanup. After that she went up to bed.

When she opened the bathroom door the next morning, Donny was quite a sight. He'd thrown up and fouled himself. While she was sponging off his face he woke up shouting for beer. "The bar's closed, Donny," she said. "Let's us have a little talk." Donny turned purple and tried to lunge at her. When he found himself strapped to the wheelchair his eyes bulged and he almost choked on his own spit. In the foulest language she'd ever heard out of his mouth he let her know what she could expect when he got loose. Then he started thrashing around in the wheelchair like a crazy man trying to break free. She was so afraid he would that she ran outside to his truck and came back with the .45 he kept in the glove compartment. Holding it in both hands she waved it in his face and in a fearful

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voice she ordered him to stop. But he just scowled out of his hangover as if he felt so bad he didn't care if she shot him or not. "You don't even have the goddamn safety catch off, Ma," he told her.

No, he wasn't afraid of her at all, and that frightened Mrs. Heckel more than anything else. She ran from the bathroom and slammed the door. Heart pounding in her chest, she dragged a straight chair from the kitchen and sat there in the hall with the automatic between her knees, afraid he was going to break loose and come through the door. This wasn't the way she'd planned things out. The handgun was supposed to be for later. And after all the rehearsing she was ashamed she'd left the damn safety catch on. For two hours she sat there listening to him bang about like an animal in a stall. Then the noise stopped, as if he'd grown tired. And she was tired, too.

When she awoke it was early afternoon and a voice on the other side of the door was calling sweet as pie, "Hey, Ma. Hey, Ma." Something told her it was safe to open the door. And there he was. During the banging around he'd gotten the wheelchair all cockeyed with one wheel jammed in alongside the commode and the other off the floor. She didn't know how long he'd been there like that with his head and a shoulder cramped up against the wall. But it had taken the steam out of him.

When she'd straightened him out she went to the kitchen, heated up a can of vegetable soup, and brought it back in the pot. She fed him with a spoon. "What's all this shit about, Ma?" he asked after the first couple of spoonfuls. So she explained what life had been like for her those past few years and how disappointed she was in him.

"Just look at the meat on your bones, Donny," she told him. "Look at that strong back. Why, if your father and I'd been raising livestock we'd have won prizes with you. But we weren't after livestock. So here's the problem, Donny. I can't keep you tied up like this forever. You smell too bad already. And your word isn't worth anything. So I can't let you loose. You'd just be all that harder to catch the next time. So I've got to kill you."

"No, you won't, Ma." He laughed. "But, hey, you're already in deep shit. This is kidnapping. And pretty soon my buddies'll come looking for me."

"Didn't you hear the news, Son? You got religion and you're off to do missionary work in the Northwest. The minister at the Church of Truth or Consequences out on the bypass was so happy when I

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told him one of his sermons saved your soul, he even remembers you at church services. By next Sunday the whole town will know." Turning to go she said, "Oh, start thinking about dinner. You get to choose anything you want."

Mrs. Heckel closed the bathroom door and went into the kitchen. She drank a coffee and read the newspaper. Then she went upstairs and stripped his bed and put the bedclothes in the laundry. When she was done she rolled the television set out into the hall and opened the bathroom door. "I don't mean to prolong things," she said, handing him the remote control. "But I can't do what has to be done until it gets dark. You might as well enjoy yourself."

Donny was still treating things like a big joke. "Hey, Ma." He smiled. "You won't shoot me. Know why? You wouldn't want to disturb the neighbors."

She didn't look at him. "The neighbors'll just think it's you watching your loud TV," she said. "How about that beer now?" Before he could think of a reply she was back with an open beer can and a glass straw left over from her husband's last days.

Donny drank the beer quickly, belched, and trying to sound thoughtful said, "Drinking's like pissing money away. So I'm going to quit, Ma."

"At this late date why bother, Son?" asked his mother.

"I thought maybe my drinking's why we have our little, you know, . . . fallings-out," he explained.

" 'Fallings-out'? Is that what you call them?" said Mrs. Heckel, wondering where on earth he'd dredged up an expression like that. She got him another beer. Then she went upstairs and started packing his things in boxes and carrying them up to the attic. It was late afternoon and starting to get dark when she came back down.

She found Donny so deep in thought he hadn't noticed the Western on the TV. When he saw his mother and heard the gunshots on the screen he tried to change the channel, but dropped the remote. She picked it up and put it back in his hand without a word. Then she sat down on the chair in the hallway.

"This isn't going to work," said Donny. "You don't know a rat's ass about killing anybody, Ma."

"What's to know, Son?" she asked.

"See, there you are," insisted Donny. "Jesus, Ma, like where would you dump my body?"

"You've been walking past your burial plot for a month now. Out there by the front walk."

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Donny opened his mouth and closed it. Mrs. Heckel could almost see the wheels turning inside his head. After a while he grinned. "Ma, that ground's frozen hard as a rock. What are you going to do, keep my goddamn body around until the thaw?"

"Well, I'm glad to see you're taking an interest, Donny," said Mrs. Heckel. "But, you see, I never knew when I could work all this into my busy schedule. So I needed a winter contingency plan, too. I've been letting the freezer chest in the basement get low. Right now there are four bundles of newspapers down there—if you'll excuse the expression—keeping your place warm. Just because I've got murder in mind doesn't mean I want to run up the electric bill. Come dark I'll trundle your earthly remains outside and around to the basement door and freeze you with a view to a spring planting."

Donny pondered that long and hard before asking halfheartedly, "What about my truck?"

"The flooded ore hole off Long Lane," said Mrs. Heckel. She sat in silence for a while. Then she said, "You know, you're right, Donny. I didn't plan this well. I should have thought of the front hall carpet. I want you done bleeding before I wheel you out of here. Look, back when I was young we'd sometimes say, 'Let's not and say we did.' So how about we skip eating and just let the record show the condemned man ate a hearty dinner." She took the remote control from him and turned up the volume.

"It's a good murder plan," admitted Donny in a quick, unsteady voice. "A real good plan. I didn't think you had it in you. No, sir, I didn't. But you forgot one thing, Ma."

"What's that, Son?" she asked.

"Ma, how would you get back from the ore hole?"

"Son, I'd just have to walk."

"I couldn't allow that. Not in winter. It's three miles. You'd catch your death. A helpless woman walking alone beside a deserted road at night?" He shook his head. "No, sir, not Donny Heckel's mother, Ma."

"That the best you can come up with, Son?" asked Mrs. Heckel, putting the muzzle of the automatic between his eyes.

"Hey, lay off, Ma," he said. "Go easy with that thing, will you? That thing can kill people."

"Guns don't kill people, Donny," she said in a flat, tired voice. "People kill people."

Suddenly Donny was crying. "I'll leave town, Ma. I'll get the hell out and never come back. You'll never see me again."

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Mrs. Heckel looked at the MacDougals with a crooked little smile. "So there we were, both crying our heads off," she told them. "What a pair! Well, a mother knows when her son finally speaks the truth. So I said, 'All right, but it's got to be right now before I change my mind. Out of this house and out of town and never coming back.' Well, that got him nodding like a crazy man.

"So I rolled him out onto the porch. When we got there he said, 'I need money to get started where I'm going, Ma.' Well, I can't imagine myself saying what I said next. 'Son,' I told him, 'I gave you life. I don't have to give you money, too.' But then I took the five hundred dollars I'd gotten out of the bank for that purpose and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. 'This isn't a loan,' I told him. 'I'm buying everything you own under this roof. So you've no reason to ever come back. If you do, the flower bed and the freezer will be waiting.' So I pushed him over to the top of the ramp we had built for his father. When I'd unstrapped his right arm I nudged him on his way with the automatic. 'Goodbye, my child,' I said.

"Well, down he went. By the time he hit the sidewalk he'd worked his left arm free. Before the wheelchair ran off onto the grass he had one leg loose and was doing a kind of stiff-legged run, dragging the wheelchair behind him like a man with a big aluminum dog clamped onto his ankle. He finally kicked it loose as he clambered up into his truck on the passenger side. Then off he roared with never a backward look.

"And I found myself wondering how, him smelling and looking as bad as he did, he was ever going to find a motel that would take him in when he needed to get some sleep. But that wasn't my problem anymore."

Polly put her arm around the woman's shoulder. Just then old Mrs. Haverstick called from the Celebrity Pie Toss booth. "Ready when you are, Mr. MacDougal," she said with the sweetest little smile. Squaring his shoulders, Wallis thanked Mrs. Heckel for confiding in them. Then he left her in Polly's sympathetic hands and marched toward the bull's-eye with a the-hell-with-the-blindfold step.

"And you never heard from Donny again?" asked Polly.

Mrs. Heckel shook her head. "Not until a month ago. A postcard with his address. Some town in Oregon. I looked it up in the gazetteer. Nothing there but a state prison. I remember hoping he was an inmate. He wouldn't have made a good prison guard."

* * *

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As Polly was putting the tureen on the table Wallis came into the dining room carrying the Widows' Club cookbook with a finger marking his place. "Killer Mushrooms," he said, disapprovingly, "Deadly Herbs, Hole-in-the-Bowl Chili, Meet-Your-Maker Chocolate Cake." He sat down at the table and shook the book at her. "This damn thing's too lethal to be legal." He made a grand gesture of unfolding his napkin and putting it in his lap. "And speaking of legal, the next time you see Mrs. Heckel remind her that her son . . . "

"The worthless bum . . . " said Polly, sitting down in her place.

" . . . has every right to come back to town if he wants to. She can go to the police for protection if she so chooses. She can bring charges against him for assault. But she most certainly cannot, I repeat, cannot shoot him down like a dog." Wallis leaned forward with the soup ladle. "Warn her that if the miserable lout shows up around here and then suddenly disappears, Wallis MacDougal will have to go to the police." He raised the lid of the tureen and peered inside hopefully. Then he frowned. "What's this?" he asked.

"Eat your gumbo," Polly told him.

Her husband sat back and drummed his fingers on the cookbook for a moment. Then he gave an incredulous chuckle and filled his bowl. Polly gave him time to imagine what it would be like to have the blood in his veins turn to aspic. Then she tapped the table with her forefinger. "Donny Heckel's nothing but walking landfill," she said sternly. "And he's been well and truly warned not to come back. If he does, why, I think a reasonable person could say that he'd up and committed suicide."

Wallis stirred the gumbo with his spoon and stared down into the vegetable depths. After a moment he said, "Mind you, I never claimed he was the grand prize." He cleared his throat and added, "How about this: tell Mrs. Heckel that if her son shows up again, Wallis MacDougal would take it as a personal favor if she fired her first shot across his bow. Like a warning."

Polly was satisfied. "Eat up," she said, smiling to show he had nothing to fear from the dinner. "Or you won't get any dessert."

"It had better not be pie," said Wallis.

Polly did not answer. She was already working on her next story. It would begin something like this:

" 'Herbicide. Malone speaking.' Lieutenant Crenshaw Malone of the Gardenville Police Department listened for a moment with the telephone pinned between rotund cheek and shoulder while he bus-

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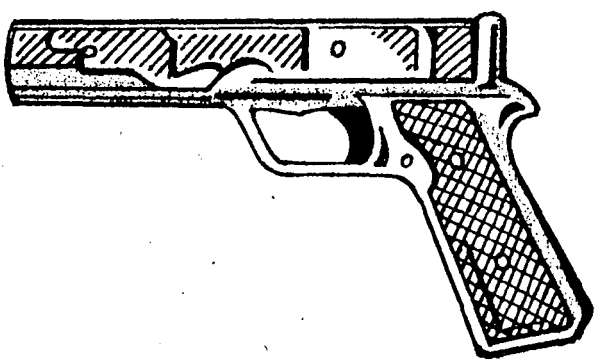
ied himself tidying up the papers on his desk. 'No,' he said at last, 'Wrong M.O. Your boy carved up Radichov and left him looking like the last rosette of summer. My boy juliennes his victims. But hey, Spud, thanks for touching base.'

"Malone turned from the phone to his sallow-skinned visitor. Parnell Parsnip sat in his tight suit, fiddling nervously with the brim of his porkpie hat. Malone sighed inwardly. Porkpie hats! He didn't know they still made porkpie hats. What a bunch of sticks-in-the-mud the root vegetable crowd was! Outwardly he said, 'Sorry about the interruption, Mr. Parsnip. So what is it makes you think your neighbor Mrs. Sidney Greenbean has murdered her son Stringfellow?' "



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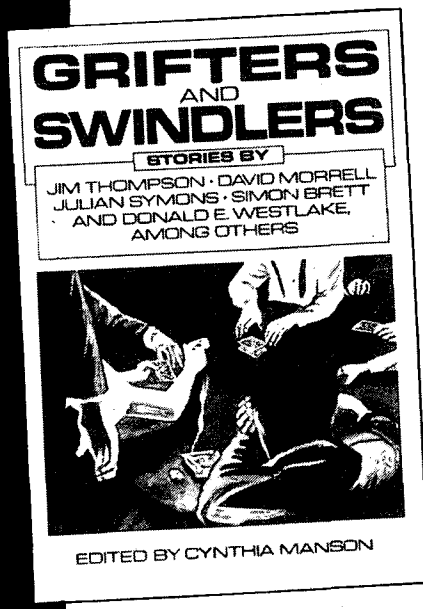
THE BEST OF THE LOWLIFE
GRIFTERS AND SWINDLERS

Edited by Cynthia Manson



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Alison White's stories have appeared in a variety of magazines in the U.K., and several have been broadcast on BBC radio. The author lives in Merseyside, England. She describes herself as a great fan of EQMM, *which makes us all the more pleased to welcome her to our pages . . .*

THE ICE MAN

by ALISON WHITE

Ever since Cyn phoned last Sunday I've been tense. Divorce should be final, I've always thought—but then I made the mistake of marrying and divorcing my cousin didn't I? I should have listened to my mother.

"I know it's perfectly legal," she'd said. "But it's risky, *inbreeding,* you know." Unlikely with Cynthia. Breeding was something she was not interested in. At least that's what she told me.

"It's Beryl's engagement party next Saturday at the Park Hotel," Cynthia said on the phone. "You should come. I don't see why she need lose an engagement present just because of our differences."

"Well—"

"Don't start arguing, Andrew."

I don't know why she said that. We'd stopped arguing way back, during our marriage when I realised it was pointless.

"Certainly I'll come. No doubt I'm expected."

"Of course you are, you're *family.*"

"Will you arrange a room for me?" I wanted to get off the line. Why did Cynthia always have this effect on me? The funny thing was, I don't think she was ever aware of it. She often accused me of not reacting to anything. Outwardly no, but inwardly . . . I'd discovered I *hated* her just a few weeks after we married.

"Of course. There's something else . . ."

"Oh?"

"I've started courting again. You don't mind, do you?"

Mind? I felt relief. Someone else she could torment. "Of course not." My tone was lighter. "What's his name?"

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"Well, you know what I am for nicknames, Andrew . . ."

Oh yes, I knew all about that.

"His name's Len," she said, "Len *Lyons,* would you believe? Well, I didn't like that."

There was very little you ever did like, Cynthia, I thought, but stayed silent.

"And he has red hair! The name Len Lyons just lends itself to it . . . and of course he's so *big*. So I call him Leo. Like Leo the lion, see?"

"I see. Anyway, Cynthia—"

"Oh all right, I thought you'd be interested," she said petulantly. "He's twice the man you are, but you'll see that for yourself."

She hung up and I went and poured myself a scotch to stop my hand from trembling.

"Andrew!" Cynthia swooped like a vulture as soon as I arrived at the party. "Is your room all right? Leo's next door in 202—I didn't do it deliberately though."

Didn't you, Cyn, I wondered? Didn't you?

"Say you don't mind."

"Of course not." I leaned forward and kissed her cheek. She wore a dress of royal-blue satin and a huge pair of dangly blue earrings. She'd never worn jewellery when we'd been married.

"Here he is," she said proudly, pushing a man of about forty towards me.

"I'm sure you two have lots to talk about," Cyn said, and hurried off.

He spoke first. "Cyn talks a lot about you."

"We're still related when all's said and done. Er—how did you two meet?"

He gave a peculiar smile. "I'm a police officer. We met when I had to investigate Cyn's problem—but you probably know about that, don't you?"

"Er, no, I don't think I do," I said nervously. Was he accusing me of something?

"I thought you might," he said slowly. "Are you still interested in unusual animals, Andrew? Your hobby, I believe. Particularly *snakes?*"

"Well yes, but what has this got to do with Cynthia's . . . problem?"

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. "Cyn's had some letters," he said, getting out a cigarette and lighting it. She had made me give up smoking—it hadn't put her off him though. "Nasty letters from someone with a nasty mind."

"Poison-pen letters?"

"That's right. From a weirdo. They mention snakes. Cyn told me about your little pet insects and how you had always wanted to buy a snake. Got quite het up when she wouldn't let you. Rather a coincidence, don't you think? Ex-husband liking snakes, then they feature in these letters?"

I could feel my stomach churning as it always did whenever Cynthia was nearby, and I willed it to stop. "Len—Leo, Cynthia and I—we parted on reasonable terms. I've no reason to write to her, and anyway she'd know my writing. And no one's questioned me."

For a moment he stared and said nothing. Then he sneered. "You haven't been questioned because she requested it, insisted it wouldn't be you. Whoever it is though, *I'll* find them."

I forced a smile. "I understand your concern, but I'm sure it's nothing, although very upsetting of course. But I'm very pleased for you both, you know—your getting together, I mean. Really I am."

Cyn reappeared. She'd loaded her plate up with food from the buffet and also one for Leo. It made me feel quite ill when she coyly popped a stuffed olive in his mouth.

"Getting acquainted?" she simpered.

I could see why Cyn thought he was like a lion. The way he was staring at me it looked as though he was ready to pounce and tear me into pieces. The image grew clearer as he took a chicken leg from his plate and began ripping into it. He enjoyed the chase too, the way he had hinted and led up to telling me about the letters, like a cat teasing and tormenting before the kill.

Cyn was very good at planting ideas in people's heads, then they acted thinking it was on their own initiative. I was sure she'd dropped hints that I might be involved in those letters.

Later on Cyn sidled up to me at the bar. She was frowning. I noticed that her makeup had settled in an orangey mass around her eyebrows. Horrible really.

"Andrew, you're not cross that Leo mentioned the letters, are you?"

"Did you really think it was me?"

"Oh no." She swung her head from side to side in exaggerated denial, the cheap earrings flying. "It was just with the snakes . . . and you did always have a bit of a thing about them, didn't you?

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So I couldn't really ignore it. I mean, I was pressed for every possible suspect."

"What exactly did the letters say?"

She shuddered. "Awful things. Horrible. That I was just like a snake—squeezing the life out of everyone around me!"

I patted her shoulder. How accurate, how very very accurate. "Forget it, Cyn, I would."

She looked at me for a minute. There was a piece of mushroom stuck in her tooth; I wondered how long it had been there. "I never know what you're thinking, Andrew. I mean, you did used to say horrible things like that to me once, didn't you? You did."

I started to count to ten. Yes I did, I thought. Once.

"Then you just went all cold on me, remember? You didn't seem to show any emotion anymore. I used to call you the *ice* man, didn't I?"

That's right, Cyn, you did. The ice man, that's me. And I did accuse you of squeezing the life from me, I did show my feelings once. Then I decided my emotions were dangerous. I was better as an ice man, and of course our marriage had to end before disaster struck.

"You're doing it now, Andrew. You've clammed up and I just don't know what's in your mind. You're doing it again."

"Cynthia, that's all in the past. We're friends now."

She wasn't even listening. As usual she'd hound and pester, winding me up until something else caught her eye. Then she'd drop the subject, having bled me dry. People like Cynthia left emotional wrecks in their wake.

"There's Leo," she said and scuttled off after him like a fat blue beetle.

I dreamed of snakes that night. Lovely snakes, like the cobra I had always wanted. Cyn had hated the idea and said she would be frightened it would get out of its tank and squeeze her to death. That was how stupid she was; cobras were venomous—I didn't want a boa constrictor, I had already married one. My dream that night was of Cyn squeezing my cobra to death. Squeezing the life out of it like she had done to me. She was shaking her head and screaming. Leo was in the background laughing. I woke up in a cold sweat.

I felt a little better after I'd showered and dressed. I planned to avoid the rest of the family, Cyn included, by breakfasting in my room. It was outside my door as I had ordered, but the hotel staff

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had made a stupid mistake with the papers. Instead of the usual supplement with the Sunday *Times* was one of the magazines of one of the more lurid Sunday tabloids. Then I noticed Room 202 was written on it. Hadn't Cyn said that was Leo's room? The scandal sheet I held in my hand seemed to be pitched at about his level. Ironic really, all our married life Cyn had accused me of being vulgar and tasteless, but it seemed she was blind to any faults Leo might have. I went and knocked on his door.

Leo answered eventually. He was grubby, unshaven, and dishevelled. I explained about the mix-up and he wearily let me in while he found his paper and we exchanged magazines. He was rather surly and I was glad to go. But as I left and turned to say goodbye, against the crumpled sheets and twisted duvet of his bed I saw quite clearly one of Cyn's long blue earrings. . . .

I had to go and see her, didn't I? She'd mentioned she was on the ground floor in one of the bigger rooms with a patio—and typical of Cyn, her patio windows were open. I had a feeling they would be. Silly woman.

There was no one about, so I thought I'd surprise her and nipped in through the windows. She was in the shower; I could hear her singing. Lovemaking with her leonine friend inspired song, did it? On the odd occasion when we'd made love she hadn't sung. Leo, it seemed, had given her a new lease on life.

I sat on the bed and waited. Funny really, the way Cyn had treated me. She had ruined our marriage, you could even say ruined my life. Cyn enjoyed manipulating people—it was not surprising she made enemies. Only when I stopped showing emotion did she appear to lose some of her self-satisfaction and permanent smug smile. The old hatred was bubbling up in me again as she began another song. She was probably a laughingstock with Leo and his friends, and she couldn't even see it.

I stepped into the bathroom and could see her silhouette through the shower curtain. She was as fat and lumpy as I'd remembered. Didn't she say the letters said she was like a snake? She was nothing like one. *They* were elegant, slim, and distinctive. I moved my arms up and down in a snake's twisting movement. I often make shadows like that at home. It used to frighten Cyn.

I did it again now, the shadow looking like a snake on the curtain. I suppose the steam added to the effect, and I gave a slow hiss. Silly really, but anyway . . . she turned with a gasp, and then slipped. I heard a crack as her head hit the hard cold marble, and beneath the

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curtain I saw the running water flush with red. I waited a moment, then peered round just to make sure. . . . Yes, she was dead. Quite, quite dead. I hadn't touched anything, so I slipped out unnoticed and went back to my room.

It was her own fault, putting ideas in people's heads. She'd said to me once, "Sometimes, Andrew, I feel as though you almost want to kill me." I did, but I never thought I'd do it.

And I hadn't of course—it was an accident. But still—I suddenly felt a great sense of freedom. I wonder who really did write those letters. . . .

ON OUR COVER

Doug Allyn's fiction-writing career began in 1985 with a short story for *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* entitled "Final Rites," a piece that brought him that year's Robert L. Fish Memorial Award. The Fish award was only the first in a long string of honors. In fact, we're willing to bet that no one else so newly arrived in the writing business has received so many plaudits. Mr. Allyn has been nominated four times for an Edgar Allan Poe Award, and once for an Anthony Award, the awards given each year at the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention. After placing second in the EQMM Readers Award competition in 1989, he went on to take top honors in 1993, placing first and third.

A rock musician by trade, Doug Allyn is a person of enormous energy. Most days he tours with his band within a fifty mile radius of his home in Montrose, Michigan. By the time he and his wife Eve, a bass player for the band, arrive home from the evening's engagement, it's often two A.M. By six, Doug is at his typewriter and Eve is preparing to set off for her day job.

Last spring when we invited Mr. Allyn to pose for our cover, we had no idea the session would show us another fine quality of the author. The day we had planned so carefully began to turn into a comedy of errors when the raven we had ordered to sit on the author's shoulder turned out to be a crow, and a molting crow at that. After a fruitless search for another bird, we settled for our thinly feathered friend, only to have him take a painful peck at our author's ear. We eventually got the photo we wanted, and discovered in the process that Doug Allyn is not only a writer and musician of note, he's a terrifically good sport as well.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Female leading characters—cops, private eyes, amateur sleuths, spies, and occasionally even murderers—have occupied the mystery fiction driver's seat in recent years. Below are considered the current cases of several of them, in and out of series, plus a token male for balance.

**** Nancy Pickard: *But I Wouldn't Want to Die There,* Pocket Books, $20. Jenny Cain, who has quit her job as director of the Port Frederick, Massachusetts Civic Foundation, is offered an interim position previously occupied by a friend—along with a chance to solve the friend's murder. Though the job, troubleshooting problems with potential donors and recipients, is similar, the locale is quite different. The mystery plot is typically well-worked-out, but small-town Jenny's interaction with the New York City milieu is the most memorable feature of the book. Pickard's New York is alternately funny and frightening, attractive and nightmarish, peopled by a vividly realized cast of quirky characters.

**** William D. Pease: *The Rage of Innocence,* Viking, $22. Detective Sergeant Christine Boland of the Maryland State Police, not a series sleuth, is among the investigators working on the murder of wealthy Marian Avery. Husband Cooper Avery is accused, but Christine questions his guilt, at least partly because she doubts he would risk having his two children, one of whom has been traumatized into a catatonic state by the crime, witness their mother's death. The long and complex novel, its events rooted in the Communist witch hunt of forty years before, will be enjoyed by fans of the police procedural or the Big Trial novel. Readers' reactions to the surprise solution will vary, but Pease has structured his plot and drawn his people masterfully.

*** Dorothy Gilman: *Mrs. Pollifax and the Second Thief,* Doubleday, $20. This is the tenth novel in a series that began in 1966, at the height of the espionage boom, with *The Unexpected Mrs. Pollifax,* made into the 1971 film *Mrs. Pollifax—Spy* with Rosalind Russell in the title role. Another famous actress, Angela Lansbury, is quoted as pronouncing the Pollifax books her favorite mysteries. It's easy to see why: like Jessica Fletcher, the character Lansbury plays in TV's *Murder, She Wrote,* Emily Pollifax is a cultured and capable older woman, almost always in command of the situation and much too active and vital for the patronizing "little-old-lady" tag applied to characters like Miss Marple. Her adventures aren't much more be-

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lievable than Jessica's, either, but I found this one, set in Sicily with a document allegedly signed by Julius Caesar as mcguffin, too entertaining to carp. Along with the espionage plot, Mrs. Pollifax observes the romance of two agents, who express their mutual love and attraction in the abrasive style of Han Solo and Princess Leia.

*** Hazel Holt: *Mrs. Malory and the Festival Murder,* St. Martin's $17.95. Sheila Malory, professional biographer, is another middle-aged heroine in the Fletcher/Pollifax tradition. Beginning with her appearance as one of three speakers at an author luncheon, her investigation of the murder of a fellow writer and member of the planning committee for the annual Taviscombe festival is a model of the English-village mystery, developing along very familiar lines but delivered with literate panache.

** Eleanor Boylan: *Pushing Murder,* Holt, $19.95. Closer to little-old-ladyhood is Clara Gamadge (widow of Henry, the bibliophile hero of Elizabeth Daly's forties' mystery series), who spends most of her fourth solo case in a hospital bed recuperating from a broken ankle and an attempted poisoning, both suffered at the opening of the titular mystery bookshop. Despite the institutional setting, this is the Malice Domestic novel at its most domestic, if not its most malicious. (I'm tempted to call it the first Christmas mystery of the season, but yuletide settings seem to turn up all the year round these days.) For me, Clara and her detecting team of family and friends have too little mystery to solve, but the telling is smooth enough and the climax nicely managed. The emphasis on alcoholic consumption is appropriate in a spin-off from a series of the forties, a hard-drinking decade for American detective fiction.

** Marion Rosen: *Death by Education,* St. Martin's $17.95. Greta Gallagher, teacher and counselor at an L.A. high school, solves a couple of student murders and seeks romance in this readable but unremarkable traditional whodunit, the hardcover equivalent of a Harlequin Intrigue. While Greta and her comic unionist colleague Maxine are entertaining enough company, principal Adam Mason, the male romantic figure, is a real drip. I don't know what she sees in him.

*** Robert J. Randisi: *Hard Look,* Walker, $21. New York private eye Miles Jacoby goes to Florida to search for a client's missing wife, with only a sexy postcard of her posterior as a clue. In his best form, Randisi offers a user friendly whodunit, with an agreeably intriguing but easy to follow plot and a likeable, unpretentious sleuth, who embraces Florida like a wide-eyed tourist while continuing to gravitate at mealtime to chains like Denny's and Wendy's. The effect is relaxing, even soothing, a hardboiled cozy.

Among the reprints is one of Henry Cecil's most entertaining courtroom comedies, the 1967

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novel *A Woman Named Anne* (Academy Chicago, $5.95), concerning a divorce case and the ambiguous role of the correspondent. While the book occasionally reveals its status as a novelized stage play, Cecil's witty give-and-take works equally well in either delivery mode.

If you are a prospective mystery writer, or if you would just like an idea of how real-life sleuths for hire do their jobs, you'll enjoy *Private Eyes: A Writer's Guide to Private Investigations* (Writer's Digest, $15.95). The first two authors, Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, have contributed many short mysteries to *EQMM* and other magazines under the name Hal Charles and for a time served as ghost of Brett Halliday in *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine,* while the third, John Landreth, is a practicing p.i. in Richmond, Kentucky. Humorously, each chapter is headed by a quote from a fictitious private-eye novel (*Josh Shepherd, PI* by Richard Steele) that sets up a genre cliché for the authors to mow down in their text.

In a recent column, I recommended two Tom Stoppard plays from BBC Cassettes, distributed in this country by Audio-Forum, 96 Broad Street, Guilford, CT 06437. They also offer an irresistible couple of items for seekers of detective fiction's nineteenth-century roots: a two-hour abridgement of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House,* masterfully read by the late Emlyn Williams, and a superb six-hour dramatization of the first great detective novel, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone.* I have one not-so-minor complaint about the latter: nowhere are the actors identified!

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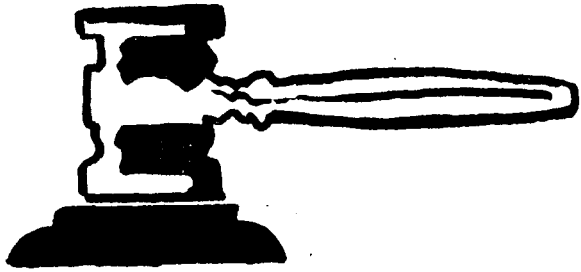

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L. J. Washburn's detective Lucas Hallam first appeared in the Shamus-Award-winning Wild Night *(Tor Books, 1987). He has since featured in several short stories and two more novels,* Dead-Stick *and* Dog Heavies. *Hallam is a private eye whose beat is the world of silent movies, in which he also works as a stunt man and extra. Here he is in a tale of danger on the set . . .*

MEDICINE TONGUE

by L. J. WASHBURN

Hallam was worried about the gag right from the start.

"There's just too much that can go wrong," he said to the director, Curtis Dearborn, when he cornered Dearborn in the studio commissary that morning before the trucks left for Bronson Canyon. "Nobody's ever jumped a stagecoach over a gully like that."

Dearborn sipped from the paper cup of coffee he held in one trembling hand while he raked the fingers of the other hand through his hair. The director looked like hell, Hallam thought, with dark circles under his eyes and a greenish tinge to his skin that testified to how bad his hangover was. The way Hallam heard it, Dearborn had been putting away plenty of bathtub gin at the Hollywood speaks he frequented these days. There was a lot of pressure on him to bring in a successful picture, since the studio was rumored to be suffering from financial troubles lately.

"Relax, Lucas," Dearborn said. "It's going to go off like clockwork. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to see that all the equipment's loaded properly before we start."

Hallam bit back the objection that came to his lips. Dearborn was in no mood to listen to anybody's complaints. The director hurried off as Hallam stood there shaking his head. Hallam was glad he wasn't going to be on that runaway stagecoach; he was working as a riding extra in the picture, but he wasn't involved in any of the major stunt work.

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Hallam was already in costume, if you could call it that. The buckskin shirt, denim pants, high-topped black boots, and broad-brimmed brown hat he wore belonged to him, not to the studio's costume department, as did the shell belt and holster in which his long-barreled Colt .45 rode. He'd worn that outfit or ones similar to it in dozens of pictures since settling down here in Hollywood back in 1916, and before that when he was riding the range for real as a Texas Ranger, deputy U.S. marshal, and Pinkerton agent. It had been said of Lucas Hallam that he was "the genuine article," but he never thought of himself that way.

He was just an old cowboy in a new-fangled world.

The caravan pulled out from the studio and headed for Bronson Canyon less than a half-hour later. It was still early in the morning, the sun barely up, but these location shoots were long, drawn-out affairs, cast and crew working from sunup to sundown some days to take advantage of the Southern California light. It didn't take long to reach the rugged, isolated area of Griffith Park where Dearborn's new picture had been shooting locations for a week now.

Hallam rode in a car with several more of the riding extras and cowboy stuntmen, among them his young friend Pecos. As usual, Pecos pestered him along the way to tell some of the stories of when he had been a gunfighter, but Hallam was in no mood for it today.

"I swear, Lucas, you're as touchy as an old silvertip grizzly today," Pecos said as the trucks and cars made their way to the canyons. "What's got you in such a bad mood?"

"Reckon I'm just a mite worried about the gag Dearborn's got planned," Hallam replied.

"The stagecoach jump? It'll be fine. I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't think so."

Hallam's head snapped around. "I didn't know you were riding the coach."

"Well, I wasn't supposed to," Pecos admitted. "But Dick Singer asked me to fill in for one of the other fellas who took sick. I'll be doubling one of the passengers inside the coach."

"Son of a bitch," Hallam muttered under his breath.

"It'll be all right, Lucas," Pecos said with the confidence of youth. "Shoot, I've jumped horses off cliffs and out of burning buildings. I reckon I can handle riding in a stagecoach."

"You be careful anyway," Hallam warned him.

Pecos's grin was cocky. "You ever know a stuntman who wasn't?"

Hallam didn't answer that.

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The stagecoach gag was the first scene on the shooting schedule, and the crew got busy setting it up as soon as the trucks arrived at the location. Hallam wasn't involved in the shot, so he walked up to the top of a hill overlooking the area and studied the layout.

The stage road ran down the hill to his left at a fairly steep angle, bottoming out at the base of the slope and then rising again for a few yards until it reached a dry wash about ten feet wide. Until today, the gully had been spanned by a sturdy wooden bridge, and hundreds of stagecoaches had clattered over it during the years that Western pictures had been shot here at Bronson Canyon. Now, though, the bridge had been dismantled for the most part. The remains of it had been carefully strewn around to resemble wreckage. Later, after all the location filming had been done, the gimmick and gadget boys back at the studio would build a miniature mockup of the bridge as it usually looked and blow it up with a small charge of powder while being filmed. When all the film was edited together, it would look on the screen as if the bridge blew up after the stagecoach had started rushing down the hill toward it. Since the villains of the story would be chasing the coach on horseback, the hero, who was handling the reins, would have no choice but to continue on down the hill, building up speed until the team would be able to leap over the ruined bridge and haul the stagecoach with them to land safely on the other side of the wash. The short incline leading up to the bridge would serve as a natural ramp. The horses were specially trained jumpers and ought to have no trouble making the leap, especially since the wagon tongue that would normally be connected to the stagecoach would be disconnected and shortened slightly. It wouldn't be too noticeable on film, but the horses wouldn't actually be pulling the coach, which was custom-built so that a gasoline engine could be installed in it. A driver concealed inside the coach would actually control it, looking out through nearly invisible eye-slits cut into the front of the stagecoach body. Approaching the jump, the driver would give the "stagecoach" enough gas to carry it over the gully without running into the horses from behind.

It was the most ambitious, complicated gag Hallam had ever seen. Curtis Dearborn was a director who liked realism, which had caused a few problems in the past. There would be a stuntman atop the coach, pretending to be the jehu, and the passengers inside would be stunt players, too, instead of the dummies that were sometimes

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used. Hallam had to admit that if it came off as planned, it would look downright spectacular on screen.

He walked along the crest of the hill toward the road. The phony stagecoach was parked there, and the boss stuntman was checking everything out. Hallam came up to him and asked, "How's it look, Dick?"

Dick Singer nodded. He was a wiry, middle-aged cowboy wearing a colorful shirt that was padded in the shoulders to make him look as big as the star he would be doubling in this scene. Singer would handle the reins during the gag. Along with the man who would actually drive the mock stagecoach, Singer's job was the most important, because he had to keep the team moving straight and fast down the hill to keep them from being overrun by the motorized vehicle. He slapped the side of the coach and said, "Looks fine to me, Lucas. Sure you don't want to come along for the ride?"

Hallam shook his head in response to Singer's grinning question. "The studio don't have that much money."

Pecos stuck his head out the coach window. "It's going to be fun, Lucas," he urged. "Not to mention a part of history. Nobody's ever done a gag this elaborate before."

"Nor one as dangerous, either," Hallam pointed out.

"Now, Lucas, you told me about how you shot it out with Paco Gomez's gang in that saloon in Amarillo when you were a Ranger. This can't be any worse than that."

"You're disrememberin' the facts, as usual. I had the county sheriff and damn near a dozen deputies backin' me up, and Gomez's bunch were too drunk to stand up, let alone shoot straight. They gave up pretty peaceful-like—"

"You're right, that's not the way I remember it," Pecos broke in. "Not the way I *want* to remember it, anyway. Come on, Lucas."

Hallam shook his head stubbornly. "Nope. If you've got your mind set on doin' this, you go right ahead, but I don't want no part of it."

"Suit yourself, Lucas," Dick Singer said as he swung himself up onto the driver's box and took up the reins. "You'd better step back out of camera range."

Dearborn was using three cameras—one on the hillside above the gully, one on the floor of the wash itself, and one on the far side. Three cameras were an expensive luxury, especially considering the studio's shaky financial ground, but Dearborn had persuaded the executives to spring for the extra cameras for this shot. Odds were they would only get one chance at capturing it on film.

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Dearborn was standing near the camera positioned in the wash. He lifted a megaphone to his mouth and called, "All right, places, everyone! You all know what to do, so let's get a great take out of this, shall we? Do we have speed?"

"Speed!" the cameraman shouted back.

"Action!" Dearborn cried.

The hidden driver inside the coach already had the engine cranked up. Dick Singer slapped the reins down on the backs of the six-horse team, and they lunged forward against their harness. At the same instant, the real driver fed some gas to the engine, and the coach lurched ahead. It was a little jerkier than normal, Hallam thought as he watched from several yards away, but not so much so that it would be noticed by the audiences in the theaters, eager to be entertained in exchange for their nickels and dimes.

The coach rattled down the slope toward the wrecked bridge. Singer whipped the team and shouted, then looked back over his shoulder. Half a dozen men on horseback boiled over the top of the ridge, pursuing the coach down the hill. They were the heavies, clad in black for the most part, shooting off the blanks in their six-guns and whooping at the tops of their lungs even though there was no sound in the picture. Hallam had heard rumors that within a few years the studios were going to start using sound pickups when they were filming, and he had to admit that scenes like this would be even more effective if the audience could hear the heavy booming of the guns and the pounding of the hoofbeats. Hallam wasn't sure he'd live to see the day when the moving pictures talked too, but if he did, it would be something to see—and hear.

Despite his apprehension, he found himself getting caught up in the excitement. It was a thrilling scene, no doubt about that. Singer and the inside driver, a man named Powell, Hallam remembered, were working together with perfect coordination. It looked for all the world like the horses were really pulling the stagecoach. They were running faster than usual, since they didn't have to pull the weight of the coach, and the vehicle was racing down the slope behind them. Hallam could almost hear the fans gasping and shouting in darkened theaters all over the country when this picture played. During the jump itself, the camera in the wash might capture the fact that the tongue wasn't really attached to the coach, but it would be over so quickly that the audiences wouldn't even notice it in their excitement.

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That was the way it usually was, Hallam thought. Folks saw what they wanted to see.

The coach reached the bottom of the hill and started up the short incline to the bridge. Hallam heard the hidden engine roar even louder as Powell poured on the gas. Singer held the team on a line straight as an arrow, and then they were at the brink of the wash, leaping up and out with precision and power and grace. . . .

Even with all the noise going on, Hallam heard the sudden terrified shout from Dick Singer and then saw the stagecoach plummet into the wash.

It crashed head-on into the far bank of the gully, the coach splintering on impact. The horses had made the jump safely, but the falling stagecoach dragged them back over the edge, and they fell the dozen feet to the bottom with shrill, frightened whinnies that turned into screams of pain as bones snapped and shattered. Dust billowed up from the bottom of the dry wash, and Hallam couldn't see a thing anymore. He could hear the wild shouts coming from all over the location, though, as he began running down the hill as fast as his long legs would carry him.

His pulse pounded inside his skull. Pecos had been in that coach, and the whole damn thing had come apart when it hit the wash. The coach had been sturdily built, but it hadn't been constructed to survive an impact like that. No telling how many of the men inside had been killed.

One thing was certain. Hallam had seen Dick Singer caught between the coach and the bank of the gully, and there was no way the stuntman could have survived the crash.

Hallam joined the rush of people into the gully, sliding down the near bank. Curtis Dearborn and his cameraman and assistant director had been the closest and had already pulled several victims from the wreckage. The AD was helping one man to sit down not far away, while the cameraman crawled into what was left of the coach. Dearborn stood waving his hands and shouting hoarsely, "Stay back, everybody stay back! Give us some room!"

Hallam bulled past the director and reached out to lend a hand as the cameraman helped Pecos out of the coach. The youngster had a cut on his forehead that was bleeding freely and was holding his right arm tight against his body with his other hand, but other than that he seemed unharmed.

Hallam slipped an arm around his waist to support him. "Come on, boy, let's get you away from here," Hallam said.

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"What happened, Lucas?" Pecos asked in a choked voice. "What went wrong?"

"I don't know. How bad are you hurt?"

Pecos touched his bleeding head as Hallam lowered him to the ground at the side of the wash. "I've got this scratch, and my other arm's bunged up some. Maybe broke."

"Broken bones heal, and so do scratches," Hallam assured him. "You sure you're not busted up inside?"

Pecos shook his head. "I don't feel a thing wrong."

"Well, you're damned lucky." He glanced at the wreckage, where folks were still buzzing around like bees after a piece of watermelon. "A whole heap luckier than Dick Singer."

"Dick!" exclaimed Pecos, trying to struggle to his feet only to be held down by a gentle but firm hand on his shoulder from Hallam. "What happened to Dick, Lucas?"

"I saw him fall in front of the coach just before it hit. I reckon he didn't make it, kid."

Pecos shook his head, tears running down his cheeks and cutting trails in the dust that coated his face. "I just don't understand it," he said in a wretched voice. "Everything was worked out ahead of time. Nothing should have gone wrong."

Hallam glanced at the wreckage again. Like he had told Pecos, he didn't know exactly what had happened here in Bronson Canyon.

But he intended to find out.

"Mr. Hallam! Could I talk to you, please?"

The voice came from behind Hallam and Pecos as they walked across the studio parking lot toward Hallam's flivver. It was late afternoon, and they had spent the day in the studio's infirmary. The cut on Pecos's forehead was stitched up and covered with a bandage that caused his hat to sit awkwardly on his head, and his right arm was in a sling. It had been determined that the arm was not broken, though, so Pecos hadn't been sent on to one of Los Angeles's hospitals, the way some of the other victims had.

Miraculously, only Dick Singer had been killed in the crash, although everyone inside the coach was injured to some extent. One man had two broken legs, a broken arm, and a shattered collarbone, but he was the most badly hurt of the bunch. He'd been insisting as he was loaded into the ambulance that he would be healed up in time to work on the next picture on the schedule, too, which hadn't come as any surprise to Hallam. Cowboy stuntmen were some of the

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toughest—and stubbornest—hombres on the face of the earth.

Right now, though, Pecos didn't look very tough, and Hallam wanted to get the boy home so that he could rest. He wasn't happy about the delay as he turned around to see who was calling to him.

An attractive blond woman in a dark blue dress and a hat the same shade hurried toward him and Pecos. She looked vaguely familiar to Hallam and he knew he had seen her around the lot, but he didn't know who she was. As she came up to them, she said, "You *are* Lucas Hallam, aren't you?"

"That's right," Hallam rumbled. "Is this important, ma'am? Because if it ain't—"

"Oh, it's very important," the woman said. "You work as a private detective in addition to your job as a stuntman, don't you?"

"I've got a P.I. license, take a case every now and then," Hallam admitted, trying to curb his impatience. He glanced at Pecos beside him. The youngster was pale and tired-looking, but he was all right for the time being.

"Very good. I want to hire you."

"Hire me? To do what?"

"To investigate that horrible accident out at Bronson Canyon this morning. I understand you were there."

"Yep, and so was this young fella here. In fact, he needs to get home—"

"This won't take but a minute," the woman insisted. She was pretty in a wholesome, cheerful way, although she didn't look very happy at the moment. "I should introduce myself. I'm Phyllis Dearborn."

Hallam frowned in surprise. "Curtis Dearborn's wife?" he asked before he could stop himself.

"That's right, although that situation may change momentarily."

"Sorry," muttered Hallam. He had heard the backlot gossip about how Dearborn's wife was planning to divorce him. That was another reason Dearborn had been hitting the speakeasies lately, according to the grapevine, along with the pressure from the studio. Divorce was hard on a movie career, although a director could recover from it easier than an actor could. The public seemed to care less about the private lives of the folks behind the cameras.

"That's quite all right. I'm not speaking to you as Curtis's wife now, Mr. Hallam. I'm here representing the Hollywood Animal Protective League. I'm the president of the organization, you know."

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Hallam just nodded, although he hadn't known any such thing. He moved in a lot different circles than society ladies like Phyllis Dearborn.

"I want to hire you on behalf of the League," she went on. "I'm sure you've heard of us and the work we do to help prevent the injury and maiming of poor defenseless animals during the filming of motion pictures?"

That rang a bell for Hallam. There were several such organizations here in Hollywood, all of them trying to improve the conditions for animals on movie sets. Their targets were usually Westerns and historical epics because of all the horses involved in most of those productions. By and large, the cost-conscious studios hated the animal protection groups, since the measures demanded by the organizations were usually more expensive than the normal way of doing things.

"Listen, Miz Dearborn, I'd like to talk some more to you, but I got to get Pecos home—"

"Surely you know that all six of the horses involved in that accident this morning were so badly injured that they had to be destroyed," Phyllis Dearborn said sternly.

"Yes, ma'am, and I'm sorry—"

"Being sorry doesn't help those poor animals, does it, Mr. Hallam?"

"She's right, Lucas," Pecos put in. "Nothing worse than seeing a good horse have to be put down."

Hallam took a deep breath. Like most of the cowboys working in Hollywood, he felt a genuine fondness for the movie horseflesh. Every time he had to do a horse fall, he was careful not to put the mount in any more danger than was necessary. But that was just part of the business as far as Hallam was concerned. He was risking his own neck every time he yanked the wire for a Running W, too.

"What is it exactly you want, Miz Dearborn?" he asked.

"I want you to prove that that calamity was the result of carelessness and irresponsibility on the part of my husband. The League is going to file a lawsuit against Curtis and the studio on behalf of the owners of those horses, in hopes that barbaric practices such as this will not continue."

Hallam's weathered face creased even more in a frown. "You *do* know that a gent got killed in that crash, don't you? Dick Singer was a good hombre, a friend of mine. And this League of yours is goin' to court over some horses?"

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Phyllis Dearborn had the good grace to flush a little in the fading sunlight. "Of course, we're very sorry about Mr. Singer. But *he* wouldn't have been killed, either, if Curtis hadn't been so stubborn. It's really his fault, not the studio's. Why, if you ask me, Curtis ought to be charged with murder."

"Murder?" Hallam repeated in surprise. "I didn't like that stunt, either, but the crash was an accident—"

"No," Phyllis Dearborn's voice was firm. "It was no accident, Mr. Hallam. That stunt was impossible, and Curtis knew it. Just ask Warren Gervin. Curtis did, and Warren told him it couldn't be done. But Curtis went ahead anyway, and now a man and six horses are dead. That's where I'd start the investigation if I were you, Mr. Hallam. I'd go talk to Warren Gervin."

"Haven't said I'd take the job yet," Hallam muttered.

"You will, though, won't you? The League wants to hire an investigator with some experience in these matters, and I'm told that you know a great deal about horses and stunts and things like that."

Pecos had to put his two cents in again. "Lucas knows more about most things than anybody else I know, ma'am."

Phyllis Dearborn lifted her chin and asked, "Well, Mr. Hallam, will you take the job?"

Hallam hesitated. He had to admit that what she had just told him was interesting. He was acquainted with the man she had mentioned, Warren Gervin, although he didn't know Gervin very well. Until a couple of years earlier, Gervin had been one of the top stuntmen in the business. Then an accident—a fall of two stories that could have just as easily killed him—had crippled Gervin and ended his career. Hallam had heard that Gervin still did a little consulting work for some of the studios, and from the sound of what Phyllis Dearborn said, her husband had sought Gervin's advice on the stagecoach gag.

And if Gervin had warned the director against trying it, and Dearborn had gone ahead anyway . . . Well, Hallam could see how Dick Singer's survivors, as well as the owners of the destroyed horses, might have a case against Dearborn and the studio. Murder was still a pretty strong way of putting it, but sheer, reckless, damnfool stubbornness—that was more like it.

"Will you at least talk to Warren and make sure of what he told my husband?" Phyllis Dearborn asked.

Hallam nodded. "I reckon I can do that much. But I got to take this boy home first."

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"Thank you, Mr. Hallam." She caught his hand in both of hers and shook it enthusiastically. "I know you probably think this is terrible and that I'm working against my own husband . . . well, my soon-to-be-ex-husband, I suppose you should say . . . but we really have to do something to make sure that tragedies like this don't ever happen again. Surely it can't help the picture business for Hollywood to ruthlessly slaughter helpless animals just because no one will take the time and trouble to speak up for those who have no tongues. Well, the animals *do* have tongues, of course, but they can't speak. That's what I mean."

"Yes, ma'am," Hallam said when she paused to take a breath. "I understand."

"Thank you again. I'll have a check for you, whatever you like, when you report back to me." She handed him a card embossed with her name and an address and telephone number. "That's our home. Curtis isn't staying there anymore, so you don't have to worry about him being there if you visit or call. Just let me know as soon as you've talked to Warren Gervin."

"Yes, ma'am."

Phyllis Dearborn gave him a smile, said, "Good evening, young man," to Pecos, then turned and walked across the lot to a big Packard with a liveried chauffeur waiting behind the wheel. The driver hopped out, opened the rear door for her, then got in and drove off into the gathering shadows of dusk. Hallam watched the car leave the lot and vanish into the array of lights that were coming on all across Hollywood.

"That's one lady who likes to talk," Pecos said.

"A regular medicine tongue," Hallam replied quietly.

"What's that?"

"Indian name for somebody who talks all the time. Wonder if one reason her husband moved out is because his ears got tired."

"Pretty nice-lookin', though. For an older lady, I mean," Pecos added.

Hallam snorted. "Yep, she must've been ever' bit of thirty-five." He put a hand on Pecos's shoulder and steered him toward the flivver. "Come on, boy. Let's get you home, and then I'll go have me a talk with Warren Gervin."

Hallam took Pecos to the boardinghouse where the youngster rented a room and turned him over to his landlady, who promised to see

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that Pecos got some rest. Hallam left the boardinghouse and headed north into the hills.

He knew that Warren Gervin had a cottage up there on one of the narrow side streets off Mulholland. A few years earlier, Hallam had been to a party Gervin had given for some of the stuntmen in town. That had been before the accident that crippled Gervin, but Hallam hadn't heard anything about the man moving since then. He was pretty sure he could still find the place.

Twenty minutes later, he sent the flivver angling off Mulholland and followed a lane that looked familiar in the glow of the headlights. Gervin's cottage perched right on the edge of a hill, overlooking the vast spread of bright lights that made up Hollywood. Hallam saw the view beginning to appear as the trees around the lane thinned.

A car was parked in front of the small frame bungalow. Hallam's headlights swept over it. He brought the flivver to a stop, killed the engine, and stepped out.

Somebody inside the cottage yelled in pain and fear.

Hallam stiffened at the sound. Something wrong was going on in there, no doubt about that. He reached through the open window of the car and picked up the coiled shell belt and holster he'd put on the seat beside him earlier. He never went anywhere without some real cartridges in his pocket, so he slipped the Colt out of the holster, tossed the belt back into the car, and began thumbing shells into the cylinder as he trotted toward the cottage.

He'd never been one to stand aside from trouble.

Talking to Warren Gervin was his business right now, and if that meant busting up a fight, fine.

Hallam took the three steps up to the small porch in a bound as something crashed inside.

There were no lights burning, but the front door was open and Hallam could see the lights of the city through another open door at the back of the house. A pair of struggling figures blotted out those lights so that Hallam could dimly see their silhouettes. An arm rose and fell, and there was a loud, ugly thump.

"Hold it!" Hallam called.

One of the figures spun toward him, and a flash lit the room for an instant. The noise of a gunshot slammed against Hallam's ears as he threw himself to one side. He didn't know where the bullet went, but he hadn't been hit.

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The gunman was still firing, though, trying to track Hallam through the darkness. A slug smacked into the wall near Hallam's head. Hallam triggered a shot in return as he struggled to his feet, but he couldn't tell if he hit anything. He was half-blinded by the muzzle flashes and half-deafened by the explosive reports in the small room.

Lights loomed on Hallam's right, and he realized he was next to a window. Without hesitating, he threw himself at it. If he could get out of the cottage, he thought, he could move around and maybe get behind the gunman.

Hallam had busted through dozens of saloon windows on movie sets, but those had been made of spun sugar and balsa wood. The real thing was a lot different and hurt a hell of a lot more when he crashed through the glass frame with his shoulder. But he was through and falling the short distance to the ground, rolling with the fall . . .

Rolling right off into empty air.

Hallam let out a startled curse as he realized that Gervin's cottage had been built even closer to the edge of the hill than he had thought. Then a split-second later, he slammed into the slope below him and kept rolling, crashing through the brush that covered the hillside. Branches clawed and scratched at his face as he tried to grab something and bring himself to a stop. Somehow he managed to hang on to his gun as he tumbled down the hill.

About fifty yards down the slope, Hallam finally brought his plunge to a halt. He hurt all over, but he ignored the pain and pulled himself to his feet. There was bad trouble at the cottage, and he had to get back up there.

Before he had gone more than twenty feet, though, he heard the slamming of a car door and then the frantic growl of an engine. Tires squealed and gravel spurted as somebody left in a hurry. Hallam tried to speed up his pace, but the slope was steep and thick with underbrush that held him back at every step. It was long, frustrating minutes before he reached the top of the slope again.

By that time the sound of the car's engine had faded away. Hallam found the open back door of the cottage and ran inside. "Gervin!" he shouted. "Gervin, you here?"

There was no answer. Hallam ran straight through the cottage to the front door and peered out. Sure enough, the car that had been next to his flivver was gone, just as he expected. Whoever had taken the shots at him had fled.

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But what the hell had happened to Gervin?

A bad feeling grew in Hallam's belly as he remembered the thump he had heard just before the shooting started. It had been the sound of something hard hitting a human skull. Hallam had heard it all too many times in the past.

He fumbled around on the wall until he found a light switch and flipped it on. Squinting against the sudden glare, Hallam looked around the room. This was a combination living room and den, with a door leading into a small kitchen and then on out the back. The bedroom and bathroom were to the side, and that was all there was to the house. It took only a moment to search every room and confirm something that took Hallam by surprise.

He was alone.

He had expected to see Warren Gervin's crumpled, lifeless body when he turned the lights on, but no one else was in the cottage. There was a large smear of blood on the floor next to the kitchen door, though, and that was where he had seen the two figures struggling.

But the corpse, if there had been one, was gone.

Hallam drove through the night, still trying to ignore the aches and pains from the fall down the hill. The wheels of his brain were turning over rapidly. He knew he ought to stop at the nearest telephone and call Lieutenant Ben Dunnemore, his friend on the Hollywood homicide squad, because what had gone on tonight at Warren Gervin's cottage was sure as shooting either murder or attempted murder.

But that missing body had him worried.

He followed Mulholland back down into town and dug out the card Phyllis Dearborn had given him. By the light of a passing streetlight, he read the address on it and turned the flivver toward the neighborhood where the Dearborn house was located. He wanted to talk to her before he did anything else. There was a question he had to ask her.

Fifteen minutes later, Hallam pulled up in front of a large white house that sat at the top of a sloping, well-manicured lawn. He left the flivver at the curb and went up a curving flagstone walk to the front door. Chimes sounded somewhere inside when he thumbed the bell.

A maid answered the door and gave him a dubious frown as he asked, "Is Miz Dearborn here? I need to talk to her."

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"I'm not sure . . ." the maid began, and Hallam knew why she was hesitating. After that roll down the hill, his clothes were dirty and torn, and there were scratches on his face. He probably looked like some sort of lunatic. But it was important that he talk to Phyllis Dearborn.

"Just tell her that it's Lucas Hallam, and it's about her husband and Warren Gervin."

"Very well," the maid sniffed, leaving Hallam on the doorstep as she went to speak to her mistress.

The servant's attitude had changed a little when she came back a couple of minutes later. "Mrs. Dearborn wants to see you right away," she said.

She led him down a hallway into a parlor and left him there, and a moment later Phyllis Dearborn came in. She was wearing a long silk dressing gown that swirled around her ankles. She would have been breathtakingly lovely if she hadn't looked so worried.

"What is it, Mr. Hallam?" she asked. "I didn't really expect to hear from you again until tomorrow."

"Well, I started my diggin' tonight, ma'am. Your husband doesn't happen to be here, does he?"

She frowned in confusion. "No, I told you he hasn't been staying here since we separated."

"I just thought he might have stopped by. . . ."

She shook her head emphatically. "No. Curtis knows that I don't want to see him anymore. Our lawyers do our talking for us now."

"But you *do* know where he's living now, don't you?"

"Well, yes," admitted Phyllis Dearborn. "I have his address and his new telephone number. It's an apartment over on Vine."

Hallam spotted a telephone sitting on a fragile-looking antique side table. He picked up the receiver and asked, "What's the number?"

Phyllis Dearborn looked as if she was going to be stubborn and not give it to him without an argument, but then she lifted her silk-clad shoulders in a pretty little shrug and recited the number. Hallam gave it to the operator, then listened as the telephone on the other end rang futilely twenty times.

He hung up and said, "Give me the address, and tell me any places your husband's been spendin' time lately."

"What is this about, Mr. Hallam?" She wasn't nearly as talkative tonight. Hallam's attitude and appearance, as well as his questions, obviously had her worried.

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"I'm just tryin' to find out what your husband was doin' tonight."

"He's in more trouble, isn't he?" Phyllis Dearborn chewed her lower lip and managed to look attractive doing even that. "Curtis has done something else."

Hallam shook his head. "I don't know."

That was true as far as it went, but he had some suspicions. According to Phyllis, Warren Gervin had told Curtis Dearborn that the stunt Dearborn planned was not only impossible but dangerous. If Gervin testified to that in court, it would be enough to nail Dearborn's coffin shut. The director would be lucky if criminal charges weren't brought against him, and at the very least, his career would be ruined forever. Between the impending divorce, the damages he would have to pay, and the fact that no studio would ever hire him again, Curtis Dearborn would be penniless, with absolutely no prospects.

That was enough to drive a man to murder.

But first Hallam had to establish whether or not Dearborn had an alibi for the past hour or so. If he did, that would mean the intruder at Gervin's cottage had been someone else. Hallam wanted as much information as he could get before he turned everything over to Ben Dunnemore. And he still hadn't figured out why Dearborn—or anybody else—would carry off Gervin's body when they fled.

Phyllis Dearborn gave Hallam the address of her husband's new apartment and also the names of several speakeasies Dearborn had been known to frequent. It was clear that she was a little reluctant to part with the information. She might have been divorcing Dearborn, but some of the protective instincts born of a long relationship were still there. As Hallam started to leave, he paused in the door of the parlor and looked back at her.

"Maybe it's none of my business," he said, "but how come you and your husband split up?"

"I couldn't take being in second place anymore."

Hallam frowned. "I never heard anything about Dearborn havin' another woman."

Phyllis shook her head. "Not another woman. His movies. You worked for him, Mr. Hallam, you know how single-minded he was. He felt there was nothing he couldn't capture on film if he put his mind to it, and he worked to make it true. Unfortunately, in the process, he didn't have enough time left over for anything else in his life."

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Hallam nodded slowly. That fit with what he knew of Curtis Dearborn, all right. And it made the man's motive for murder even stronger. Dearborn had sacrificed his personal life for the movies, and he wouldn't give them up because of what Warren Gervin might say in the courtroom.

"None of the accidents on Curtis's pictures would have happened if he wasn't so stubborn," Phyllis went on. "Like I said, he thought he could find a way to film anything."

A thought suddenly occurred to Hallam. "That picture Gervin was workin' on when he was hurt—your husband was the director, wasn't he?"

"Yes, that was Curtis's picture."

"So Gervin wouldn't have had any reason to lie for him in court. Likely he would've enjoyed seeing your husband take the blame for Dick Singer's death."

"I . . . I don't know. It's true that Mr. Gervin was injured while doing a stunt for Curtis, but I never got any sense that he *blamed* Curtis. . . ."

"Well, we'll see," Hallam said. What he didn't say was that the noose seemed to be getting tighter and tighter around Curtis Dearborn's neck. Dearborn would have known that there was no way he could talk Gervin into changing his story to protect him.

Hallam nodded to Phyllis Dearborn and left the house. The lady probably wouldn't get much sleep tonight, what with all the worrying she was doing, Hallam thought.

But then he didn't plan on sleeping much, either.

No one answered Hallam's knock on Dearborn's door. The lock wasn't a very good one, and Hallam was inside the apartment in a matter of minutes, looking around to confirm what he had suspected. Dearborn was gone. His clothes and things were still there, so he must have left in a hurry.

Well, Hallam thought, he hadn't expected to find Dearborn sitting there with Gervin's body. He left the apartment and relocked the door, then started making the rounds of the speakeasies. Hallam knew just about every speak in Hollywood, and over the next couple of hours he visited not only the ones Phyllis Dearborn had told him about but several others besides. No one in any of them had seen Curtis Dearborn that evening.

Hallam sighed as he got back into his flivver. He wasn't sure what he had intended to do if he caught up with Dearborn and the director

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didn't have an alibi. Hallam sure as hell wasn't going to help him cover up a murder. But he would have liked to hear what had happened from Dearborn himself.

Now there was nothing to do but turn the whole thing over to the cops.

Hallam found a telephone in a drugstore, called Ben Dunnemore at home, and gave the homicide lieutenant the whole story, starting with the disastrous stunt that morning. Dunnemore chewed him out for not reporting the trouble at Gervin's hillside cottage right away, but once Dunnemore was through with his grousing, he said, "I'll get some boys out there right away. You come by headquarters first thing in the morning, Lucas, and give me a statement. Maybe we'll know more by then. Gervin's body could turn up before morning."

"If he's dead," Hallam said.

"From what you told me," grunted Dunnemore, "he couldn't be anything but. Remember, first thing in the morning."

"I'll be there," Hallam promised.

Then he went back to his own apartment, but just as he had expected, sleep was a long time coming despite his weariness. There was just too much to think about, and his brain wouldn't let go of any of it. Sometime far into the night, Hallam finally dozed off, feeling as if there was an answer waiting for him, squirming away just out of reach of his fingertips every time he reached for it.

The studio was buzzing with gossip when Hallam got there the next morning after stopping by the police station to give his statement to Ben Dunnemore. The guard at the studio gate told Hallam the same thing that Dunnemore had earlier—Curtis Dearborn was still among the missing, and so was Warren Gervin. If Dearborn had hoped to quietly dispose of Gervin and have it thought that the man had mysteriously disappeared, the plan had been ruined by Hallam's untimely visit to the cottage.

The guard also had a message for Hallam. The studio's production chief wanted to see him right away.

Hallam went to the big office building that sat in front of the sprawling shooting stages and was quickly ushered into the sanctum of J. Frederick Darby. The executive was a small, balding, deceptively mild-looking man who wielded more power than anybody else around here. He waved Hallam into a chair in front of the massive hardwood desk and said, "Good morning, Lucas. Thanks for stopping

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by. It's always good to see you, but this time I wish the circumstances were pleasant."

Hallam dropped his hat on the floor next to the chair and said, "I reckon you want to hear about Curtis Dearborn."

"That's right. I've heard the gossip, of course; it's impossible to keep *anything* a secret for very long in this town. But I want the straight story from you, Lucas."

Hallam gave it to him.

Darby leaned back in his chair and shook his head when the big cowboy was finished. "It doesn't look very good for Curtis, does it?" he said with a sigh. "He's gone off the deep end. I've always been afraid it would happen, the way he throws himself so whole-heartedly into his pictures. With that trouble with his wife, and the problems the studio has been having, it was just too much for him."

"Is the studio really in that much trouble?"

Darby grimaced and nodded. "We were counting on Curtis's new production to put us back in the black, and he knew it. I'm sorry now that I ever told him. That extra pressure may have been just what it took to make him snap. Now Dick Singer's relatives are going to sue, and there's a good chance we'll be ruined. I wish I could say otherwise, but . . ." Darby shrugged. "My chief accountant could tell you just how bleak the financial numbers are if he were here. That's another cross I've got to bear this morning."

Hallam shook his head. "Don't reckon I understand."

"Roy Henson—you know him, he's the head of the accounting department—he called in sick this morning. Has pneumonia or some such. I talked to him myself, and my God, he sounded awful, not like himself at all. I don't know when he'll be back. So everything seems to be falling apart at once." Darby sat up and brought a clenched fist down on the desk, an uncharacteristically emphatic gesture for him. "I'll tell you what's causing it, Lucas. It's this obsession with *sound*. If people would just leave the picture business alone and let them remain silent, the way God intended, then we wouldn't be having so much trouble."

Hallam didn't say anything, but he doubted if God cared much whether or not the movies talked. Seemed to him like a pretty frivolous subject to occupy the Almighty's attention.

"If there's anything I can do to lend a hand, you just let me know," he said to the production chief as he stood up to leave the office.

Darby stood up as well and shook hands with him across the desk. "Thank you, Lucas. We'll be picking a new director today to try to

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salvage what we already had in the can on Curtis's picture, so you'll be notified when we're ready to start shooting again."

Hallam nodded his thanks and went back outside. It was a pretty day, but he doubted if Curtis Dearborn was paying much attention to the weather, wherever he was holed up.

A figure limping along toward one of the huge stages caught Hallam's attention. "Hey, Stan, hold up a minute," Hallam called as he trotted across the lot.

Stan Powell, who had been driving the motorized stagecoach the day before, turned to wait for Hallam. When he came up to the stuntman, Hallam went on, "Didn't expect to see you around here today. Figured you'd still be in the hospital."

"They released me a little while ago, and I came straight over here," Powell replied. He was a medium-sized man in his forties with bruises on his face and a heavy bandage around his right ankle. "I wanted to see if I could figure out what happened."

"How're you feelin'?" Hallam asked, not surprised that Powell wanted to find out what had caused the accident. He wouldn't have expected any less from a stuntman. Hallam didn't know the man very well, since Powell usually did car gags and seldom worked on Westerns, but like most stuntmen, he was stubborn.

"I'm all right, I suppose," Powell said with a nod and a smile. "Banged my head a little, but you know it takes a lot to dent a stuntman's skull. And I sprained my ankle during the crash, but it's okay."

"You were lucky."

"We all were," Powell said, his tone more solemn now. "All of us except Dick."

Hallam fell in step beside Powell as they walked toward the back of the lot. "Got any idea what happened?" Hallam asked.

Powell shook his head. "Not really."

"Reckon the coach just didn't have enough steam to make that jump."

"No, that's not it," Powell said without hesitation.

Hallam looked over at him, eyes narrowing. "You're sayin' the gag could've worked?"

"Hell, yes, it could've worked. Nearly did. But the motor started cutting out when we went up the incline toward the bridge. It gave out entirely just before we got there. That's why our speed dropped and we didn't make it across."

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Hallam hadn't noticed the speed of the mock stagecoach dropping dramatically, but he had been at the top of the hill, not inside the vehicle trying to coax it through the dangerous jump. And it probably wouldn't have taken much of a drop to cause the coach to crash, he thought.

"So it was a mechanical failure, rather than the stunt itself, that caused the wreck?"

Powell shrugged as he limped along. "Well, I can't say that for sure. Maybe we wouldn't have made it even if the engine hadn't cut out. But the way it was, there was no way in hell we were going to clear that wash."

"How come you didn't try to stop when the engine cut out?"

"I did. That's how my ankle got sprained. I had my foot jammed against the brake pedal. Didn't do any good."

"So you were going too fast to stop but not fast enough to make it across the gully?"

"That's right," Powell said. "Why all the questions, Lucas?"

Hallam looked at him again. "You haven't heard about Dearborn and Warren Gervin?"

"I told you, I came straight here from the hospital. What's this about Dearborn and Gervin?"

Hallam gave him a quick version of the story, and Powell let out a low whistle of surprise. "Sounds like Dearborn's gone loony, all right," Powell said.

"What about Gervin? He told Dearborn the stunt couldn't be done."

Powell shook his head and said, "I'm not surprised. Nothing against Warren, you understand, but after that accident a couple of years ago, he . . . lost his nerve, I guess you could say. He was too crippled up to do any gags, of course, but some of the studios would come to him and ask him for advice on stunts they had planned. Warren always told them the gags were too dangerous, no matter what they were. Even if he hadn't been injured too badly to get back into stunt work, he would have turned down anything that was offered to him. Just too scared, you know what I mean?"

Hallam nodded. He'd known other men like that, men who had made their living with a gun until their fears caught up to them. They were never any good after that.

"There it is, what's left of it," Powell said, pointing. They had reached the rear of the lot, and the remains of the wrecked stage-

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coach sat there on a trailer behind some unused scenery flats. It barely looked like a stagecoach anymore.

Hallam watched while Powell began poking through the wreckage. The motor was located under the driver's box. The hatch that allowed access to it was crumpled, but with Hallam's help Powell managed to pry it open. He started going over the tangled mess of machinery inside.

"Lucky the whole thing didn't catch on fire and blow up," Powell commented after a few minutes. "Gas line's broken, and the fuel tank's probably ruptured, too."

Hallam leaned over and looked underneath the coach, seeing the gaping hole in the gas tank that had been concealed under the floor. If it had exploded, everyone inside would have been burned to a crisp, including Pecos. Hallam felt a surge of anger. Even if the stunt *had* been possible, as Powell claimed, Dearborn never should've taken the risk. Hallam reached up through the hole in the tank and brought his fingers out, smelling the gas and making a face. Maybe he was old-fashioned, but there was a lot to be said for horses. They never blew up, for one thing.

Rubbing some grit from the gas tank off his fingers, Hallam searched for the brake lines. They were snapped, of course. They had probably broken when Powell jammed on the brakes. Not that surprising, considering the speed the coach had been making when it reached the bottom of the hill in Bronson Canyon. Just another indication that not enough planning and preparation had gone into the stunt.

"Well, there aren't any answers here," Powell said discouragingly. "I guess we'll just have to chalk it off as general mechanical failure."

"Reckon so," Hallam agreed.

And yet . . . the thought that had been jumping around in his brain the night before was there again, tantalizing him with its nearness, then fading away again. He shook his head. This was nothing but a tragic accident, he told himself. He had been there and seen it for himself. An accident, followed by more tragic twists of fate.

But sometimes, Hallam suddenly realized, what the eye saw wasn't what really happened.

And nobody knew that better than somebody who created illusions for a living.

* * *

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Night had settled down over Hollywood again, and Hallam was waiting. The cops had put seals on the front and back doors of Warren Gervin's cottage, but not the windows. With Gervin presumed dead and a bulletin out for Dearborn's arrest, nobody expected anyone to show up here.

Nobody but Hallam.

He heard the sound of the car's motor several minutes before it crept up to the cottage, moving slowly without lights along the narrow lane. Hallam stood in the living room, gun in hand, while the car stopped and the driver got out. The shadowy figure came around the side of the bungalow and climbed awkwardly through the same window Hallam had used.

Hallam moved to the light switch, flipped it up.

He had his eyes slitted against the sudden glare, but the other man didn't. The man let out a startled cry and reached frantically under his coat. Hallam eased back the hammer of his Colt and said harshly, "Don't do it, Gervin!"

The overhead light revealed a short man grown thick around the middle. His bushy hair had gone gray since Hallam had seen him last, but the man was definitely Warren Gervin. He blinked, eyes still watering from the unexpected light, and took his hand slowly away from the butt of the pistol Hallam saw tucked into his belt.

With hate burning in his eyes, Gervin said, "I should have stuck around last night and made sure you were dead."

"That's right," Hallam agreed. "But you didn't, and now you're goin' to have to stand trial for murderin' Dick Singer and Roy Henson."

Gervin shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about. Everybody knows you're a crazy old coot, Hallam."

"We'll see about that. The cops already know about the sugar you put in the gas tank of that gimmicked-up stagecoach so the motor would cut after it had run a little. You knew it'd be taken out to the location on a trailer and not started up until Dearborn was ready to shoot the gag. You left some marks when you tampered with those brake cables, too. You never figured anybody would look close enough to find the sugar or the sabotage. It would all be written off as an unfortunate accident."

"You can't blame that crash on me," Gervin insisted. "I told Dearborn *not* to try that stunt!"

"Yep, you did. But you knew it could be done. You just wanted to be able to testify in court that you warned him against it. You knew

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somebody would sue him and the studio over the crash. If the studio went belly-up because of the lawsuit, so much to the good, but what you really wanted was to see Dearborn ruined. You blamed him for the accident that cost you your career—and your nerve."

"There's nothing wrong with my nerve!" snapped Gervin.

"Reckon you didn't lose all of it, or you wouldn't have been able to sneak into the studio and dope the gas tank and fray the brake lines on that coach. You knew it'd crash, but you didn't plan on Dick Singer dyin', did you? You should've known you'd be taking a chance with the lives of all the stuntmen on it."

"You can't prove any of this," Gervin said scornfully.

"No, but Roy Henson could, since he was working with you, feeding you inside information about the money troubles the studio was havin'. I don't know how you forced him to do it, but you had some sort of hold over him. Maybe he was skimmin' some cream off the top himself, and you knew about it. That'd explain some of the problems the studio was havin'. Henson panicked, though, when the crash was a lot worse than what you told him it'd be. He came up here last night and told you he was goin' to the cops. You had to shut him up." Hallam paused. "And that's when I came along."

"You son of a bitch," Gervin said fervently. "Nobody would have missed Henson. He didn't have any friends, any family, just his account books. He could've dropped out of sight and nobody would've given a damn."

"Reckon that must've been you who called Fred Darby this mornin' and pretended to be Henson."

"I couldn't just leave him here," Gervin said. "I couldn't have his body found in my cottage." He was breathing heavily now, and the look of a trapped animal was in his eyes.

"So you hauled him off while I was fallin' down the hill," Hallam said. "You stashed the body somewhere and holed up, waitin' to see what was goin' to happen. Worked out just fine for you, didn't it? The cops figured you were dead and that Dearborn killed you. I thought the same thing myself for a while, till I realized there was no proof you were even dead. And that got me to thinkin' about who it could be who really died here last night. I had a talk with Darby this mornin' and took a look at that wrecked stagecoach with Stan Powell, and things started fittin' together."

Gervin shook his head. "You can't prove it. You can't prove anything. I can turn and walk out of here right now, a free man."

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Ben Dunnemore said from the kitchen doorway behind him, "I don't think so, Mr. Gervin."

The former stuntman spun around, and despite Hallam's earlier warning, his hand darted toward the gun in his belt. He let out a crazed cry, and Hallam knew he was going to try to shoot his way out. Hallam sprang forward, lashing out with the Colt in his hand. The barrel thudded against Gervin's head.

Gervin folded at the knees, his pistol falling unfired from his fingers.

Dunnemore motioned to the officers who came out of the kitchen with him, and Gervin was picked up and taken out of the cottage, his hands cuffed behind him even though he was still stunned. The lieutenant turned to Hallam and said, "You were right, Lucas. And the case is going to be a lot easier to prove since you got Gervin to admit what he did. He'll break down and tell us where to find Henson's body, I'm sure of it. But I still don't know why I let you talk me into this setup. Somebody could've gotten hurt."

"Stuntmen are all crazy, Ben," Hallam said with a grin. "You know that."

Curtis Dearborn turned up three days later after a bender in Tijuana and was shocked to learn that the cops had considered him a murder suspect for a while. Warren Gervin's conviction for Henson's murder and the manslaughter of Dick Singer muddied up the court proceedings until all the lawsuits against Dearborn and the studio were thrown out. Dearborn was unable to get more work anyway, and his wife divorced him. Hallam lost track of him after a while and couldn't bring himself to be too sorry. Dearborn had brought a lot of his troubles on himself, and the way Hallam saw it, Phyllis Dearborn deserved better.

He saw her every now and then, leading some protest about how animals were treated in the movies, and from what he heard, she was as much of a medicine tongue as always. She was like talking pictures, Hallam thought, an idea that was coming whether anybody wanted it or not. But whatever happened, the movies would survive. Hallam was sure of it.

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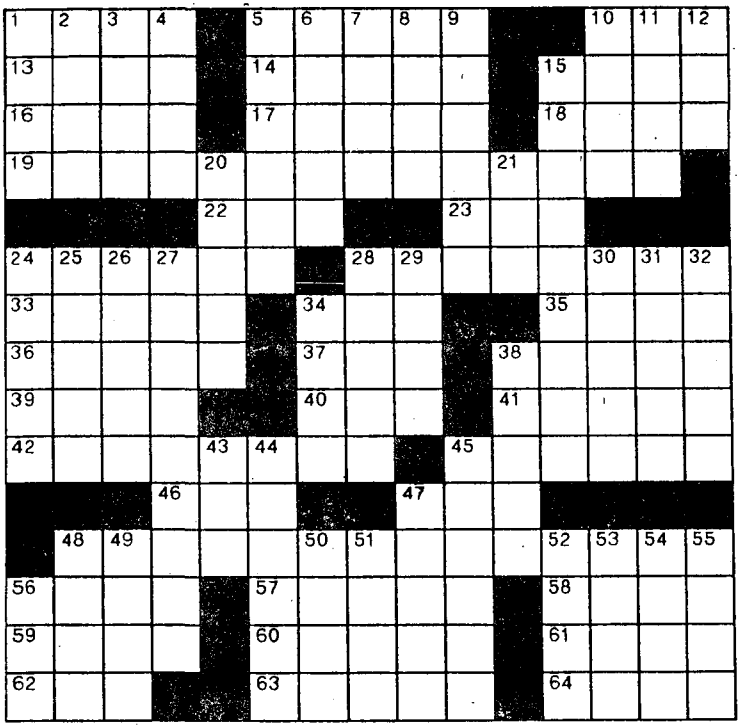
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Alan Penick



Solution on page 122

ACROSS

1 E. S. Gardner title word
5 Fairy tale brother
10 Formicary denizen
13 City on the Oka river
14 Remove moisture anew
15 Three, in Berlin
16 "—— bene" (Latin for take notice)
17 More cold
18 Legendary Wyatt
19 His titles are very colorful
22 Dem. alternative
23 Ref. vol.
24 Cholla or saguaro
28 Harry whose titles mention a day and a cleric
33 Brilliantly colored fish
34 Actress Ullmann
35 City WSW of Tempe
36 Street show
37 Masticated and ingested

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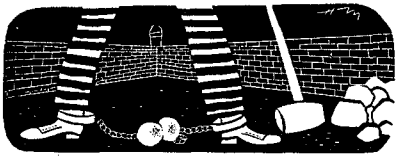
38 Sue Grafton title words after a letter
39 Power source: Abbr.
40 Site of iniquity
41 British liquid measure
42 Heated again
45 Gainsays
46 Pedro's aunt
47 Heavenly altar
48 Detective in novels with 15D phrase
56 Oriental nanny
57 Famous Kilmer poem
58 A type of stick
59 —— De Laurentiis
60 Employs
61 Word in John Sandford titles
62 Mine find
63 ". . . meet —— comin' thro' the rye": R. Burns
64 Poi source

DOWN

1 Coupled: Abbr.
2 Buck chaser
3 Third son of Adam & Eve
4 Panache
5 See 44D
6 Brief summary
7 Of a part of the mind
8 TV horse
9 "In ——", 1963 Beach Boys' ballad
10 Large inland sea
11 Jerk or dweeb
12 Gratuity
15 A Lawrence Sanders title phrase
20 Muslim sect member
21 Society column word
24 Kitchen tool
25 "Behold —— Horse:" Revelation. VI, 8
26 Baseball's famous Rod
27 Phrase starting Lilian Jackson Braun mysteries
28 Bounced, as a check
29 On a par
30 Civvies to a career soldier
31 Love to an Italian
32 Nostrils
34 Take on cargo
38 Of the lower small intestine
43 Narrow inlet
44 With 5D, her titles are names of English inns
45 Not casual
47 "—— without a name": Macbeth. Act IV, Sc. 1
48 Mideastern ruler
49 Victor Borge, e.g.
50 A small amount
51 Dry: Comb. form
52 Mtg. with a Dr.
53 Mrs. Nick Charles
54 City ENE of Budapest
55 Child's string toy
56 "Much —— About Nothing"



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a *NEW* short story by

HENRY SLESAR

Henry Slesar once explained the attraction of the murder plot this way: "A murder is human passion at its absolute peak. Your emotions have really gone haywire, out of control, when you have to resort to murder. It's an opportunity for strong drama." In this new story, things go haywire in a way the true villain of the piece could never have forseen . . .

THE INSIDE TRACK

by *HENRY SLESAR*

It was Vogel's dog that started it.

No one, not even Scott Vogel himself, knew that his sad-faced beagle was responsible for the disaster that occurred just one month after Mark Spearman came to dinner at the Vogels' suburban home. The dog had taken an instant liking to Mark, probably because he slipped him a piece of gristly steak under the Vogel table. When they had brandy on the porch—Vogel was eager to show off his pastoral view—the dog flopped at Mark's feet and kept his mournful eyes on his face for the rest of the evening.

"Her name's Pearl," Vogel said. "I call her Pitiful Pearl, but Martha hates it when I do." He grinned at his wife, a painfully thin woman who rarely spoke, probably because her husband never paused for breath.

Vogel was slightly built, with an oversize head that he liked to credit with housing a superior brain. He had earned his bragging rights. He was the highest-paid contributing editor of *Scan Magazine,* making his reputation with a series of scandal-laden articles about the rich and infamous, most of them concerning upscale crimes. The stories satisfied the deepest craving of *Scan*'s readers

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for verification that society's upper stratum was steeped in wickedness of every description. Murder, of course, was their favorite subject, preferably motivated by sexual jealousy. Vogel rarely disappointed them, even if the facts were sometimes abused in the interest of high drama.

Mark had admired Vogel before he joined *Scan* as an associate editor, a title which actually meant he was Vogel's gofer, proofreader, fact-checker, and sounding board. He was only two years out of college, a journalism major with no serious ideals. He wanted to plunge into the real world of publishing, and what was more real than *Scan*'s forthright cynicism?

He had hoped that working for Scott Vogel would be his gateway to journalistic success, but after eleven months he still hadn't published a word of his own. And even Scott Vogel's dogged research and skill with words didn't compensate for the unattractive swagger of the man.

He wasn't flattered when Vogel asked him to dinner. Vogel had been inviting everyone in the office to come out and envy the suburban palace his success had afforded him. Mark was only too happy when Martha Vogel began yawning, giving him an excuse to go home to his own studio apartment in the West Village.

It was almost a month later that he remembered the dog.

It had been a difficult four weeks. Vogel was in one of his moods, irritable, hyperactive, secretive. He was obviously working on a story, but not yet ready to bounce it off his assistant. He was out of the office every morning, clicking away at his computer keyboard every afternoon. All of Vogel's other duties were deposited in Mark's hands, and there was enough to keep Mark working late almost every night. Camilla didn't like that. Camilla was the girl to whom he was informally engaged.

On the night the dog memory returned, Mark was composing a speech Scott Vogel was scheduled to deliver at an award ceremony. Vogel hated to write speeches, but he liked getting awards. Just as he reached the closing line, Mark remembered that Vogel wanted him to include a reference to the Magazine Institute award he had won the year before. But what was it?

He went into Vogel's office in search of the plaque or certificate or statuette or whatever physical form the award took. There were enough of them on the walls and on his bookshelves, but none fit the proper description.

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He tired of the search, and sank wearily into Vogel's padded leather chair. He looked at Vogel's computer, and idly hit the power switch. Who knows? There might even be a file labeled "Awards."

But there was only one icon on the screen, and its name was "Current."

Mark hesitated only a few seconds before he clicked on the file. He didn't feel like an intruder. Sooner or later, Vogel would share "Current" with him. He would be only too eager for Mark to know about his latest real-life drama, hungry for the praise he knew Mark would bestow.

A dialogue box appeared on the screen. It read:

Please enter password.

So the file was locked. Private. Confidential.

Okay, Mark thought. Nothing unusual there. An ordinary precaution against curiosity. It was, after all, a work in progress.

Please enter password.

Mark was feeling light-headed. He had worked a fourteen-hour day, had skipped lunch, had not yet eaten dinner.

He smiled and tapped in the words:

Pitiful Pearl.

When the screen opened like a flower, and he saw the words spilling down the portrait-size monitor, Mark emitted a small gasp of surprise.

Now he was faced with a choice. Moral, ethical? He didn't know which word applied. He decided that neither was appropriate. It was just a story, one he would be working on himself, filling in missing facts, checking dates, names, places, before it appeared in the public pages of *Scan Magazine.*

He started to read.

Working Titles:
Fathers, Daughters, Death
The Yuppie Executioner
The Debutante's Fall

Palmer Smith didn't stand out among the graduating class of the Wharton School of Business in Philadelphia.

Slightly below average height, slightly below the grade average, he crossed the platform to receive his diploma with nothing more

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than a polite scattering of applause. Only his sister Jane observed the significant moment, her mind preoccupied with the chores awaiting her back home in Oakland, California. She had come a long way, but with their mother living in Italy and her elder sister a recovering alcoholic in New Jersey, she was Palmer's only available family.

(Note: more background needed on early family life.)

Jane Smith was fond of her brother. He had always been an endearing young man, handsome, in a cherubic sort of way, with straight blond hair that fell across his forehead no matter how often it was brushed back. His hair was blacker now, his face leaner but still handsome. And his personality was very much the same. Quiet, trusting, eager to please. As she put her arms around the long black robe that encased him, murmuring her congratulations and best wishes for his future, the last thing she could have expected was that his future—in less than three years—would include a double murder.

It took Palmer longer than he expected to land his first job. In that recessionary year, his hard-won MBA didn't prove to be a golden passport into the executive ranks. His financial cushion, grudgingly donated by a mother who wanted little to do with her late husband's children, was down to a few thousand dollars. In desperation, he took a job as a parking attendant.

(Note: obtain statements from garage owner, other parking personnel.)

It was in a garage on Manhattan's Upper East Side that Palmer met Maeve Brown. He knew the car before he knew its driver, a metallic-blue Porsche convertible that was almost a revered object in the facility. Then Palmer discovered that it was no less glamorous than Maeve herself.

Maeve Brown was the daughter of Hildebrand Brown, whose husband had been killed in an air disaster. The plane had been his own, one of three Cessnas in his company's inventory. Maeve had been sixteen at the time.

She was eighteen when her mother married again, to a man equally wealthy but ten years her junior. His name was Montgomery Green, the Green of Wilson, Thomas, and Green, a Wall Street firm.

Money marries Money.

It was on her nineteenth birthday that Monty Green gave his stepdaughter the Porsche, but she had decided not to take the car

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to Vassar, where she was in her sophomore year. It was in the summer, when her cascading hair was almost golden in the sunshine, that she strolled into the garage and demanded her vehicle.

Palmer's stare made her laugh.

As it turned out, the Porsche's unused battery was dead, so Palmer got to spend some time with Hildebrand Brown's lovely daughter. While he jump-started the car, hooking up the cables to a plebian domestic sedan, he made a remark about hoping the Porsche wasn't offended. Maeve laughed again, and noticed that the young attendant was good-looking.

By the time three or four trips had gone by, she also knew that he was a disappointed MBA, and suggested that she might talk to her stepfather about a job. Palmer didn't take her seriously, but apparently Monty Green did. Within two weeks, he was interviewed and hired by the personnel manager of Wilson, Thomas, and Green, and found himself working as a securities analyst.

(Note: get background on firm, number of employees, clients, type of investments handled.)

Palmer's progress at the company wasn't rapid, but his progress with Maeve Brown unexpectedly was. As if knowing he would never make the first move, Maeve invited him to a party at the family townhouse on East Sixty-fourth Street. It was unchaperoned, since her mother and stepfather were in Paris.

It was a small gathering that broke up surprisingly early, leaving him alone with the hostess. Even more surprising, Maeve seized a bottle of Dom Perignon and led him upstairs to her bedroom, promising to show him her pet, a real live panda. When they entered the room, she dragged him towards the bed, where a large stuffed panda lay against the bolsters. "Oh my God!" she cried out in mock horror. "He's dead!" She picked up the panda and unceremoniously dumped it on the carpet. Then she pulled Palmer onto the bedspread.

It would be safe to say that Palmer was bewildered by the sudden beginning of his affair. He wasn't entirely inexperienced, but there had never been a girl in his life approaching either Maeve's looks, wealth, or social standing. The fact that she was the boss's daughter both troubled and exhilarated him. He wasn't sure of the consequences, whether it would aid or deter his career. He didn't know if he was simply an amusement, a whimsy, a temporary replacement for the dead stuffed panda. Even after he spent the next eleven nights with Maeve, departing only when her parents returned from

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Paris, Palmer wasn't sure that he would ever see Maeve again, and his need for her was now bordering on obsession.

He didn't hear from her for the next two weeks, and his heart sank when he looked at the calendar. It was September. Maeve would be returning to college. He felt sure he would never see her again.

But Palmer was wrong. One night, as he watched a television sitcom in his tiny apartment, the doorbell rang. He was startled to see a teary-eyed Maeve at his door. She had three astonishing statements to make. She wasn't returning to Vassar. She loved him. She was pregnant.

Palmer was shaken by all three announcements, but any one of them would have led him to the same declaration. He wanted to marry her. He knew it was an outrageous suggestion. He knew he wasn't worthy of her. He knew her parents would consider him a fortune-hunter and a schemer and slam the door of their townhouse in his face.

He asked her anyway, and Maeve Brown said yes.

The confrontation with Hildebrand and her husband was not what Palmer anticipated. Maeve had prepared them, of course, but without communicating the most essential physical fact. She brought Palmer into the stifling elegance of their living room, sat on the overstuffed sofa with Palmer's hand in hers, and told them she had no intention of returning to school, and every intention of marrying Palmer. She wanted their love, their understanding, and their blessing.

The simplicity of her appeal made Monty Green smile. He was a large, muscular man of easygoing nature, and of course Maeve wasn't his natural daughter. Hildebrand's reaction was more emotional. She burst into tears and ran off into another part of the house. Later, Palmer learned it was the kitchen. Maeve followed her, and while Palmer was never certain of the conversation, he gathered that the chief topic was Maeve's interesting condition.

Palmer and Maeve were married at St. Vincent's Church on September tenth, with Jane Smith the only family representing the groom.

(Note: get details of wedding, guest list, newspaper coverage, etc.)

Palmer Smith may have considered himself the luckiest and happiest man on earth on September tenth, but he had not yet reached the crest of the arc. That day came on April twentieth, when Allison Smith came, a bit prematurely, into the world, forever to be nick-

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named Daisy when her tiny hands plucked one from a bouquet in Maeve's hospital room.

Happiness, of course, is a relative state, and not even Palmer would claim that his married life was idyllic in every particular.

He continued to work at Wilson, Thomas, and Green, but found himself uncomfortable with the unofficial title of son-in-law.

(Note: need interviews with fellow workers.)

He didn't object when his bride asked if she could retain her family name. He was a product of his times, and understood the new female sensibilities.

He didn't protest when his in-laws bought them a cooperative apartment on Park Avenue, and had it decorated by the same fluttering old man who had done the family townhouse.

He learned to be tolerant of Maeve's "moods," long periods of silence that Hildebrand ascribed to her pregnancy. Hildebrand seemed determined not to become a mother-in-law joke in Palmer's eyes, and they actually became friends. Palmer enjoyed her maternal sympathy, having had precious little of it from his own mother. He discovered a sadness in Hildebrand that no one else seemed to have noticed. She discovered an innocence in Palmer that touched and, for some reason, frightened her.

She had good reason to be fearful.

Because if ever there was evidence that saints can be driven into mortal sin, then Palmer Smith was the ideal example.

(Note: look for Biblical reference if available.)

Whatever the shortcomings of his new life, Daisy Brown—the name change was also Maeve's decision—compensated for all of them.

Palmer had never given a thought to paternity. He had never imagined his reaction to an infant in his life. He had always assumed that mothers were the parental half that were bent out of shape by the mere presence of a dimpled darling. Whatever cynical views he had before Daisy's arrival, they were obliterated from the day his little girl came home.

It was a case of worship on first sight.

In contrast, Maeve was often indifferent to the baby, at least to the chores Daisy imposed. She was only too happy to leave those to the nursemaid her mother hired, but Palmer resented her presence. To Maeve's amusement, Palmer often insisted on feeding the baby himself, bathing her, even changing her.

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Daisy altered their social life, too. Palmer thought they should stay home more often, at least until the baby was older, so Maeve got into the habit of going to the theater and parties and on two-day trips without her husband. Her husband the babysitter, she sometimes joked.

Then came That Weekend.

(Note: add this to title possibilities.)

At first, there was nothing unusual about the weekend. As always, Palmer was happy at the thought of two days with Daisy. Nor was he distressed when Maeve announced an overnight sail to Nantucket in the family yacht. It wasn't the first time they had been invited, nor the first time Palmer had refused. Maeve packed her bag on Friday night, and was gone when Palmer woke up early on Saturday. Woke up and went into the nursery to see his adored daughter.

There was something different about Daisy that morning. She was strangely still. She didn't wave her arms and legs at the sight of him. She felt warm to his touch.

Alarmed, Palmer called in the nursemaid, who confirmed that Daisy was running a fever. She wasted no time in calling the pediatrician whose fees were high enough to include house calls. His name was Dr. Burroughs, and he arrived within minutes. He wasn't prepared to make a final diagnosis, but he suspected it was rubella.

Palmer wasn't comfortable with illness. He had never been seriously sick in his life, or been required to tend to a sick person. He felt a sudden sense of panic, and a need for Maeve to be there. It was not yet ten A.M., there was the possibility that the yacht hadn't yet weighed anchor. There might still be time to bring Maeve home to share the burden and concern.

It was twenty minutes past the hour when Palmer arrived at the yacht basin. He spilled out of the taxi, asking the driver to wait, and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Conner, the oldest of the three permanent crew members, who was sitting on the pier and staring out over the hazy waters. He was surprised when he saw Conner holding a pint bottle of whiskey, and shocked when Conner told him that the boat had already sailed.

"How come you weren't aboard?" Palmer asked.

"Because they kicked me off," Conner grumbled. "Found this here little bottle in my gear, told me to get ashore. As if they won't drink plenty themselves, those two!" Defiantly, he uncorked the bottle and took a healthy swig. From the fumes he was exuding Palmer was sure it wasn't his first pull of the morning.

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Then he realized the oddity of the sailor's remark.

"Which two?" he said.

"The only two aboard," Conner said. "Mr. Green and his little girl. Like always."

"But Mrs. Green is there," Palmer said. "She's going to Nantucket with them."

"The old lady's no sailor, she gets sick just settin' in the harbor. She always takes the plane out, meets them in Nantucket. Real nice for those two," he said, grinning wickedly at Palmer. "Nobody to stop 'em doing the dirty deed."

"What did you say?"

"That's why he really fired me, that big bastard, he was afraid I knew what was going on. Hell, we all knew! Ever since the Bermuda trip. But he didn't fire the whole crew, did he?"

Palmer felt dizzy. He wasn't ready to accept the implications of this drunken crewman's words; he wasn't going to believe an improbable, no, impossible accusation against his wife. He thought about committing some act of physical violence against Conner, a gesture of retaliation, of faith, but he had never struck a man in his life. He turned and hurried back to the waiting taxi.

He was halfway home when he remembered Maeve's exact words of the night before.

"Are you sure you won't sail with us? Mother will be so disappointed. You know how much she loves your company, Palmer, you're her buddy. . . ."

Why did Maeve say that, if she knew her mother wouldn't be aboard?

Daisy's fever broke that afternoon, but Palmer's temperature rose steadily throughout the day. He began to remember things, small aspects of his wife's behavior, details of seemingly insignificant events. Telephone calls that Maeve always took in private. Afternoon teas with girlfriends Palmer had never met. And a vision, an image that never quite registered, of the way Maeve's stepfather greeted her with a kiss, the way he held his arm around her waist . . .

Jealous suspicion can be an insidious disease, and Palmer was badly infected. He needed to know, he *had* to know the absolute truth, and the only way he could obtain his goal was to pretend total ignorance of the terrible possibilities. Then he was ready for his next role, the role of private detective.

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On Wednesday of that week, with Daisy miraculously her happy, chortling self again, Maeve made a breakfast-table announcement. She was going to a "reunion" of sorority sisters in Boston, and wouldn't be home until the following afternoon. Palmer didn't blink. He wished her an enjoyable trip.

From his office, he called the Green's number and spoke to Hildebrand. She was delighted to hear from him, as always. She hadn't known about her daughter's reunion. She invited him to dine at the townhouse, but could only offer her own company. Monty was off on a business trip. She wasn't sure where. She never asked where.

Palmer had no trouble finding out where. He was on friendly terms with both his employer's private secretaries, Kathy and Tammi. Tammi had booked the flight. To Boston.

That evening, around dinnertime, he called the Ritz Carlton and learned that Mr. Green was not in his room. Palmer asked if he could speak to Mr. Green's daughter. There was a momentary confusion on the other end, and then a voice told him that Mr. Green and his daughter had gone out to dinner and would he like to leave a message? Palmer said he would prefer to call back and hung up calmly.

Palmer wasn't seeing straight. It was remarkable that he managed not to crash into the walls as he made his way through the house, up to the second floor, to Daisy's nursery. The baby was asleep, of course, and she whimpered when he took her out of her crib and sat down with the infant in his lap. A sound like crooning emerged between his lips, and Daisy must have found it soothing for she soon fell asleep again.

He wasn't trying to organize his thoughts. If anything, he was trying to block out everything in his mind. But then one word flashed through the darkness he was trying to create.

Bermuda.

He put the baby back in her crib, and called his mother-in-law.

"Bermuda? Well, let's see, that would have been last summer—late June or early July. I didn't go with them, you know, I backed out at the last minute. But I thought it was a good way for Monty and Maeve to get to know each other."

"Yes," Palmer said.

He put down the telephone and walked back into the nursery. He looked down at the sleeping infant he valued more than any living thing on earth, and knew the simple chronology that was the truth.

The next day, on his lunch hour, he went to a sporting goods store and asked the clerk's best advice about hunting rifles. His father-

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in-law was a sportsman, he said, citing a true fact, and he had a birthday coming up soon. When the clerk learned that birds were his favorite target, he sold Palmer a handsome 12-gauge shotgun, complete with case and a box of ammunition. Palmer wanted only the minimum amount of shells.

(Note: need details about what Palmer did rest of the afternoon.)

The next time they were invited to dinner at the family townhouse, Palmer carefully loaded the shotgun, placed it carefully in the handsome case, and then gift-wrapped it.

(Note: need details on the meal, what was served, etc.)

They were having an after-dinner drink in the study when Palmer told his father-in-law that he had a somewhat early birthday present for him. He unwrapped the box and brought out the shotgun. Before Monty Green had a chance to express his pleasure and gratitude, Palmer Smith shot him in the chest and then fired the second barrel at his wife, killing them both instantly.

(Note: add closing paragraph or keep it stark?)

Mark turned off the computer and leaned back in the padded leather chair.

It was vintage Vogel, all right. It had all the elements. It was a modern-day Gothic, a horror story, a morality play, a sex scandal, all the good things Vogel's readers expected of him.

Of course, the names were pseudonymous. Vogel rarely used real surnames when composing a story. The people were all Smiths and Browns.

But in this case, Mark wondered why the anonymity was necessary. Surely so sensational a murder case was public knowledge by now. Unless, of course, the facts were still being held confidential by the police authorities. That must be the reason, Mark decided. Someone in the upper echelons must have been leaking the story to Scott Vogel. Being *first* with a major story was the name of the game.

By the time Mark reached his West Village apartment, frowning at the blinking light of his answering machine (Camilla, for sure, and in a bad mood), he was doubting his own theory. Why would the police keep a double murder secret? The victims were obviously from a prominent family. Vogel had mentioned Wall Street, private planes, yachts, townhouses. Why wasn't this story already in the

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headlines? Was there some hidden reason for the lack of publicity?

He grew tired of speculating and turned on the answering machine. Camilla's voice said:

"If you don't call me back before midnight, *buster,* you are going to be very, very sorry."

Mark looked at his watch. It was 12:35.

In the morning, he called Camilla at home but there was no reply. Camilla hated answering machines.

He decided not to go to the office, but directly to the research library of the *Times*. He commandeered a computer and typed in a list of keywords.

Palmer, Maeve, Hildebrand, Monty, double murder, shotgun slaying . . . The news stories they generated were clearly not the one he was seeking.

After an hour of searching, he knew the effort was useless. Vogel's Yuppie killer and upper-class victims still remained anonymous.

At lunchtime he walked over to the department store where Camilla did makeovers at a cosmetics counter. She was with a customer, giving Mark time to present his case. The woman she was working on giggled and said: "Oh, don't be stupid! There aren't that many cute ones." Camilla agreed to have lunch with him.

He was glad she did, especially when he remembered that Camilla's brother was an MBA.

"Where did Leon get his degree? Didn't you tell me it was Wharton?"

"Yes," she said. "Three years ago."

"Three years! Perfect. They must have been in the same graduating class."

"Who?"

"Could you give me Leon's number?" Mark asked.

But Leon discouraged him.

"There were hundreds of guys in that class," he said. "I don't remember anyone named Palmer."

"And I'm not sure if that was his right name."

But that night, Leon left a message on his answering machine.

"Hey, Mark, I don't know if this will help, but there was one guy at Wharton, had a sister who came to see him once and got bombed out of her skull. My friend Sandy was his roommate. But his name wasn't Palmer, it was Parker. Parker Wetmore. Does that help you?"

The message stirred something in Mark's memory. *A recovering alcoholic sister in New Jersey* . . .

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It was all he needed. His bloodhound instincts were aroused. In the morning, he went to the county courthouse to check out the marriage records, not at all sure if Vogel's wedding date was accurate. Apparently, the information had been sealed by request, but Mark was sniffing so hard by now it was almost an audible sound. He went to St. Vincent's Church on Park Avenue, and was soon looking at the handwritten records of every marriage ceremony performed at its sacred altar in the last five years.

He found what he was looking for, precisely on the date Vogel had mentioned. September the tenth. On that day, Parker Richard Wetmore did take Margaret Allison Stanton in holy matrimony. Not Maeve, but the same initial.

"Stanton" was not easy to check out. Hildegarde (Hildebrand) Stanton, Margaret's mother, was a Newport blueblood whose first husband had been killed in the crash of his company jet. She had remarried, and was now Mrs. Hugh Hausman, although her daughter kept her original name, even after her own marriage. Hausman was ten years her junior, a sportsman, a yachtsman, a former professional golfer.

Mark felt a glowing sense of triumph when he had marshaled all the facts.

There was only one thing wrong.

One serious thing wrong.

Hugh Hausman wasn't dead. He was at a Pro-Am golf tournament in Florida.

Margaret Stanton wasn't dead. She was living with her husband and their newborn daughter in a co-op on Park Avenue.

Parker Wetmore wasn't sitting in a prison cell, awaiting trial for murder. He was working at Gardner, Bruce, and Hausman, as a securities analyst.

At dinner, Mark told Camilla:

"I'm going crazy. Or else my boss is."

But he couldn't explain. That was the worst part of it. He couldn't admit to having seen Scott Vogel's story. He couldn't ask Vogel about it. He had to live with the mystery, or decide that it simply didn't exist, that the parallels were only coincidence.

Curiosity was consuming him.

At seven A.M. the next morning he stationed himself in a doorway opposite the young couple's Park Avenue co-op, hoping he would be able to identify the protagonist of Vogel's story. After the first wasted hour, he decided that he would make a very bad private eye.

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At eight-twenty a young man emerged from the building with an attaché case. He had darkening blond hair, and was shorter than Mark had envisioned the "Palmer Smith" of Vogel's story. But when he casually asked the doorman if that had been his old friend Parker Wetmore who had just departed by taxi, the doorman confirmed the fact.

At one-thirty he was at his desk, deferring lunch until Vogel's arrival. Then the great man bustled into the office, checked his messages, threw Mark his usual two-finger salute, and entered his office. A moment later, his head popped out again and he asked Mark about the award speech.

"It's been on your desk for two days," Mark told him.

"Great, great," Vogel said. "We'll go over it after lunch."

Mark went out, but not to lunch. He had no appetite for anything but the answer to the riddle. He took the Broadway bus down to the Wall Street area and walked to the building that housed Gardner, Bruce, and Hausman. He had decided on a direct—actually devious—approach. He was going to meet Parker Wetmore face-to-face, on the pretext of gathering facts for a *Scan* story on the Wharton graduating class.

To his surprise, Parker Wetmore was just stepping out of the elevator and heading for the building exit. Another late luncher.

Mark didn't hesitate to go after him. He had no faith in his private-eye abilities, but Parker seemed to be unaware that he was being tailed. Mark had already decided to follow him into whatever restaurant he chose, and then fabricate some excuse to join his table.

But Parker wasn't going to a restaurant. His purposeful steps took him to Centre Street. He turned a corner and headed for a building of ancient vintage. He entered, and Mark caught a glimpse of a stairway. Wherever Parker was going, it was on the second floor.

Mark had to back up to see the weathered sign spread across the second-floor windows. It read:

JASON & FORSTER, GUNSMITHS
Everything for the Outdoorsman
Gun Safe Showroom ○ Established 1931

Mark was out of breath when he returned to the editorial offices, and he was still panting when he opened Scott Vogel's door and stepped into his office. Vogel was at the computer, and he looked up in a double surprise. Mark never entered without knocking, and

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Mark never wore anything but a placid, somewhat inquisitive expression.

"I should have guessed it," he said. "I feel so damned stupid! I should have figured it out!"

"Figured out what?" Vogel said, losing his surprise and getting irritated.

"That story you're working on! That murder story! *It hasn't happened yet!*"

Vogel's mouth started to form words. A lip reader could have told they were "What the hell are you talking about?" But Vogel swallowed them. His face went through two color changes, from angry crimson to pale alarm.

"How do you know what I'm working on? It's still in here." He jabbed his finger at the computer screen.

"It was an accident," Mark said. "I hit your password by mistake. I read the story about the Yuppie—the guy who killed his wife and her stepfather—"

"Mark, sit down," the editor said, trying to sound commanding.

"Jesus, Mr. Vogel, I saw him! Today! He went into this gun shop—just like you said in the story! And you knew he would, didn't you? He told you he would! He told you exactly what he was going to do!"

"Don't get excited. What's going to happen will happen. It's only a technicality, understand? A little time-shifting."

"But why, how?" Mark said, the second question emerging like a sob.

"It doesn't happen all the time—hell, it's the first time it's happened to me! But sometimes, in this business, you get a chance, a real special opportunity. You get someone who can give you the inside track—"

"So it's true! You got the whole story from this guy, and he told you how it was going to end, and you're going to scoop everybody, is that the idea?"

"It'll be in the next issue," Vogel said. The color was coming back to his face. He was almost smiling. "They'll eat their hearts out at *Vanity Fair*. Every magazine and newspaper editor in the country is going to be kicking himself. And then there's the TV movie—"

"But why did he tell you? For what reason?"

"Money, kid, the oldest reason in the world. Not for himself. All he'll need is cigarette money for the next forty years. He wanted

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something to leave his little baby girl. Or should I say—his father-in-law's baby?"

Mark surprised himself by grabbing Vogel's tie.

"You son of a bitch!" he shouted.

Vogel slapped his hand away. "Hey, cut that out, you know what this tie cost?" He tried to sound reasonable. "Look, I know you're upset, kid, this is a part of the game you never knew before—"

"It's murder," Mark said. "And it can still be stopped."

He reached for the phone, but Vogel snatched it away.

"You've got to call the police, Mr. Vogel! Or warn these people about the danger they're in. If you won't do it, I will, I swear it!"

"You do that, Mark, you can kiss your butt goodbye in this business!"

"And if these people get blown away, Mr. Vogel, I'll tell everyone just how it happened! How you knew what was going on and didn't open your mouth! You might even be arrested as an accessory."

The color left Vogel's face again, and his narrow shoulders took a decided slump. He leaned his oversized head against the back of his padded leather chair and stared at the ceiling.

"All right," he sighed. "All right, god damn you. I guess I can still get a story out of it. But you know what you get out of it? Nothing, kid. You're through."

YUPPIE KILLER
by
Mark Spearman

It was a startling scene that greeted Scott Vogel when he walked into the study of Hugh Hausman's elegant townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

The most astonishing fact was that Scott Vogel *wasn't* startled. He had envisioned this tableau a dozen times. He had constructed the scene in his mind as he created the word pictures that told a story of sex, lies, and betrayal.

It was the last act of the drama, and Scott Vogel, one of America's most successful writers of lurid fact-crime stories, knew what to expect: a young man in a raging fever of revenge. A young wife terrified by the sight of a gun in his hands. Her stepfather—her lover—pleading for their lives.

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Scott Vogel was there to save them. It wasn't the way he had expected the story to end. Nor did he expect that Parker Wetmore, in an explosion of anger, would fire both barrels at the intruder, at the man he thought was his friend and confidante.

Scott Vogel did save two lives, but at the cost of his own.

Mark leaned back in his padded leather chair and looked at the screen. He hadn't filled up a page yet, and he knew they were anxious for the finished manuscript, but he was tired and Camilla was waiting for him. He decided he would tackle the story again in the morning and called up his security protection program. A dialogue box asked for a password. More in tribute than irony, he typed in: *Pitiful Pearl.*

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

C	A	S	E	■	G	R	I	M	M	■	A	N	T
O	R	E	L	■	R	E	D	R	Y	■	D	R	E	I
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C	A	C	T	U	S	■	K	E	M	E	L	M	A	N
O	P	A	H	S	■	L	I	V	■	■	Y	U	M	A
R	A	R	E	E	■	A	T	E	■	I	S	F	O	R
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R	E	W	A	R	M	E	D	■	D	E	N	I	E	S
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A	M	A	H	■	T	R	E	E	S	■	P	O	G	O
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a *NEW* short story by

LEA CASH-DOMINGO

To kick off a new series for Lea Cash-Domingo, we have this month a tale set on the reservation land known as the Navajo Nation. But, as the author tells us, the word "navajo" is a perjorative term, meaning thief. The name Navajo Indians call themselves is "Dine," and "Dinetah" is their homeland . . .

A STRANGER AMONG THEM

by LEA CASH-DOMINGO

The clock had stopped.

Catherine Dale climbed onto the stool, changed the batteries, and hung the clock back on its nail. As she stepped down she glanced into the hall where an elderly Dine man sat fingering a worn black Stetson, his demeanor self-contained and patient. The stack of forms on her desk would take at least three hours to process. She looked at it and felt a trace of resentment at the man's presence. But she went into the hall to speak to him, reminding herself that her first priority as a welfare worker was to make each client's circumstances more tolerable. The welfare system on the reservation offered little actual relief to Indians—even less respect for their ways.

She sensed an unrelenting alertness in the man as he followed her, hat in hand, into her office and sat down opposite her desk. She poured him a glass of Coca-Cola as she always did for the older men, hoping to establish a mood of mutual regard. Then she removed a packet of five forms which she spread before her.

On the first form she wrote the date and the address of the Tuba City welfare substation. "Your name?"

He looked up, and she saw his eyes were clouded by glaucoma. She watched, concerned, as he reached unerringly for the glass and took a sip.

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"John Joe," he said.

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Joe?"

"My land has been desecrated."

It was an odd use of language. She waited for him to explain.

"My cow's neck was slit, my corn cut down, my horse stolen."

"Do you know who may be responsible?"

He shook his head, seeming ashamed, but she could see there was more.

"Or why?"

"No."

It was probably vandalism—white teenagers from one of the neighboring suburbs—but someone, her field investigator or herself, would have to view the damage before she could authorize any assistance. Probably herself, since with the closing of a mall at Page, her investigator was working overtime to keep up with yet more unemployed Indian families.

"Your address?" she asked.

"No address."

She struggled against impatience. "We have to have an address, Mr. Joe. I can't process your claim without one."

"My house is on the mesa above where Antelope Wash ends."

"A mobile home?"

"Hogan."

Many elderly Dine followed traditional ways, building their circular homes out of sun-baked earth and trees. As younger families became more affluent they moved from hogans into mobile homes with running water and satellite dishes as conduits for electricity.

"And how long have you lived there?" she asked.

"Long time."

"You've never had any trouble before?"

"No, ma'am."

"Have you ever received aid?"

"A year ago, but only for a few months."

She completed the last form and showed him out. Except for his impending blindness, the matter should be strictly routine. An hour's visit to see the dead cow and defiled corn, another hour to conduct a questioning search among nearby dwellers. She looked at the stack of paperwork and wondered which to do first. But Joe's strange word still rankled, nagged at her peace of mind. Desecrated.

From the edge of the road, Catherine scanned the peaceful landscape. Cottonwood trees in clusters on the otherwise red rock terrain

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and rusting water troughs surrounded by an occasional corral gave the land a spacious feel, as though it had stood undisturbed for thousands of years and would go on the same for thousands more. The mesa dropped over the Navajo sandstone cliffs to a wash fifty feet below where a handful of families herded goats and grew peaches and corn. A bird's shadow floated overhead, its great wings the only movement of the morning.

The air smelled of damp earth. It was the smell of fertile ground and morning mist. She took out a stick of gum and, chewing it, focused briefly on a thatched-roof shack that stood opposite the wash, letting her gaze move east and west, to and from the stretches of red bluff and oases of cottonwood trees, to and from the surrounding hogans and shacks which were more than a quarter of a mile apart.

She doubted anyone had seen the destructive act. The Dine were a humble people. Apart from shepherding and raising crops, they did not make other people's lives their business. Only a stranger might draw attention to himself.

Despite her blood ties to the Dine, despite her decision to live and work on the reservation, Catherine felt she was a stranger among them. Her great-grandmother Loralie Begay was nicknamed Spider Woman. Although her skill in weaving had been passed down from generation to generation, by the time it reached Catherine, it was little more than an admired art form. Catherine was not raised on the reservation; her grandmother was among fifteen hundred Relocation Indians who had moved to Los Angeles, California, so the U.S. government could claim land title to the Big Mountain area for use in mining.

She felt acutely like a stranger now as she climbed the hill to the small corral. Flies, sheeting the dead cow, repulsed her. The animal's neck had been cut and its vocal cords spilled onto the ground in a dried bath of blood. Catherine held a hand over her nose as she moved about the corral. A rope dangled from the fence. Horseshoe marks still scuffed the dirt path that led to the wash.

Catherine gazed at John Joe's modest hogan. At the summer addition of a ramada, built with poles and brush. He owned so precious little, yet his home seemed somehow impoverished, as though the attack on his few possessions had touched even the inanimate life. A scuttling wind played against the cornfield, causing the remaining stalks to flail about like paper streamers on an electric fan.

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She walked down the incline. Someone, it seemed, was intent on scaring old John Joe off his property. The old man probably had nowhere else to go. Or was rightly stubborn and wasn't about to be intimidated. She didn't like the feeling that followed her, as if the land had been contaminated, and now the taint reached out to mark her.

The closest shack stood on a hill a good half mile away from the perimeter of the reservation. Its front windows faced in the opposite direction from Joe's hogan. But the rear window, if there was one, would look down onto his home.

Catherine eyed the woman standing in the doorway. She was large in the waist as if pregnant, but was in her seventies. Her wrinkled, scrunched-up face had the paranoia of old country women who believed too strongly in God and who feared, just as strongly, the devil.

"Come about John Joe's cow?" the woman asked, revealing rotted front teeth.

Catherine nodded and introduced herself.

Inside, the main room was a shrine of sorts, a hearth covered by an old fading shawl adorned with candles and incense sticks. Woolen blankets draped the walls and a large mat covered the earth floor. An old man sat in a rickety chair cloaked in a red and purple blanket and hat. He seemed barely alive, although Catherine could make out his occasional labored breathing.

The woman invited her to sit on a yellow sofa and poured tea, dropping two sugar cubes into each cup. Catherine sipped the tea, savoring the sweet berry flavor.

"John Joe took a young wife a few years ago and last winter both she and the baby died of TB. There's been nothing but trouble since."

"What kind of trouble?" Catherine asked.

"Someone moved the ground and lifted up their bodies." She shook her head and shuddered. "As if that wasn't enough, someone poisoned his well."

These were no ordinary occurrences. "Any idea who?"

"Not someone from 'round here."

Catherine contemplated her tea. Both the Dine and Hopi who occupied this corner of the Arizona desert believed in the spirit world. They thought of life as a round lariat that encircled the universe and included Father Sky, Mother Earth, and all living and inanimate things. The handful of Christians living nearby the

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reservations had their own ideas and practices regarding evil.

"Why all the attention on John Joe?" she asked.

"He's being punished. There's talk he was out drinking when his wife was ill."

The old man beside her peered at Catherine. "Strange goings-on at night near Gray Mesa." His voice rattled as he spoke. "At least that's what they say."

"Who says?"

The man stared at the floor and the woman shook her head. It was not their place to point the finger at anyone.

It was impossible in the truck to negotiate the flooded Navajo Creek east of Gray Mesa. Catherine parked and climbed up medium-sized boulders, over clusters of scrub brush and fine red silt, her binoculars swinging from her neck. Smaller rocks tumbled out from beneath her boots. She had to scramble for a foothold. Halfway up the embankment she paused to glance at the expansive, barren red sandstone and the vast blue sky. Dine country threatened to engulf her. She turned her back on it and clawed her way up the embankment, grabbing now onto manzanita roots, kneeling on the smooth surfaces of rock face, lifting herself over loose soil.

At the top she sipped from her canteen and wiped away the sweat that had beaded on her forehead. At times like this, she wished she was less conscientious. If she turned over all investigations to the field operative and processed the claims only after he completed his visits—but no. She shook the thought from her mind. Most clients lived far below the poverty line. A delay in their claims might disable them, if not split apart their families.

A man like John Joe might never completely recover his losses. Crops took time to grow, and he was nearly blind and old, in his sixties at least, not a candidate to learn a new skill. Besides, he was a man who had been self-sufficient all his life and would not allow himself to collect a subsidy for long. She wished there was more she could do for him, but his shame was a powerful deterrent to indulgence.

Beyond a cluster of willow trees, the ground had been cleared. About a dozen sapling willows had been cut and positioned one on top of the other. She lifted them with dread to discover they hid a pit inside where an animal cage lay, with bones large enough to be a rat or gopher. Fear prickled the back of her neck.

* * *

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The clock's hands silently ticked off the minutes. Officer Stillman had closed his notepad and was capping his pen.

"Any other cases of this nature?" he asked.

Catherine rubbed her fingers across her brow and sighed. "I handle over a hundred and fifty claims for people who live from Kaibito to Ganado. I have one investigator to do visits. He's in the field nine hours a day." And a second investigator, she added mentally, who was an overly cautious intern on loan from Window Rock.

He drummed his fingers on the table. "Whatever information you can give me would help."

"It would mean going through the notes of every file."

"We all have too much work to do and not enough time."

She steeled herself against his words. She could barely keep up with the paperwork, let alone do the job as her clients had a right to expect. Many families needed practical help besides their checks. Someone to help care for their elders. To teach the men to read and write so they could get jobs to bolster their meager livelihoods. To provide transportation from the reservation to the medical clinics. If her caseload were lower, she could get out more frequently to the families and become more useful instead of being a figurehead behind a desk.

But Stillman didn't—wouldn't—understand her problems. He was full-blooded Dine. For him there was no separation of the professional from the personal. He intuitively understood the people and their lives and gave each investigation his entire concentration, even if it meant putting in sixteen-hour days.

She'd always faithfully closed the substation at five.

She chewed a piece of gum as she stood in the window, staring out at the sky where a flock of thunderbirds circled in a swarm. She wished she were more like Stillman. A city-born man raised in Flagstaff, he nevertheless retained his ties to traditional Dine values. On occasions when he came out to intervene in a drunken brawl or to drive a pregnant client to a clinic, he spoke to her about the wisdom of having flexible rules, of being able to laugh at misery, of not showing irritation.

She could use his humor now to separate herself from the disgust she felt at the information in the files.

The field investigator had scribbled notes in a handful of files, describing families who had had windows punched out of their mobile homes, whose doors had been spray-painted in red with the

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names of heavy-metal groups, whose septic tanks had been tampered with, causing toxins to leach into the ground water.

Why hadn't the investigator said anything to her about it?

Probably because he, too, thought it was the work of kids, having a few laughs at the expense of Indian families. To do the job right, she would have to visit each home. If the families had been threatened off their land, she'd turn the matter over to Stillman.

She parked the truck and walked along the canyon floor. Pale moonlight caused the beige sand to resemble an unnatural skin, with white tree trunks poking through like bleached bones. The first shack, when she finally came to it, stood alone, a defeated animal. Its roof had partially caved in. Its porch sagged beneath drifts of sand. Foot-long nooses made of baling wire hung from the branches of the surrounding trees. Catherine angled her camera straight up and shot picture after picture, brushing aside the nooses, which dangled in her face like cold electrodes.

She walked to the back of the shack where she pried open the back door and shone her flashlight on the walls. Painted white and black faces sprang into view, like macabre *chindi.* Ghosts of the dead. The sight sickened her. Catherine thought incongruously of her great-grandmother Loralie Begay, forced to make the long walk to Bosque Redondon where she and nine thousand Navajos were imprisoned. She thought, too, of her grandmother Mary Nez who had been given diseased cattle, moldy flour, and rancid bacon in exchange for land. The painted faces mocked her; restless spirits would steal her soul if she wasn't careful.

In the first light of morning she visited the tenth home on her list. It was part hogan, part house, with a smoke hole above a yellowing window. Catherine entered through the east door, noting where little loops of yucca fiber hung from the beams of the log and pole ceiling. She brushed against cobwebs, peered up at a scorpion running for cover along the logged edge of the ceiling. The walls were covered with rugs of *veis,* and with feather ornaments. When she came to the end of the house, she saw, perched on a hook, a cat's head, its fur aged to a matted mask, its teeth barred eternally. Horrified, she rushed outside, stumbled along the canyon floor over rocks and clumps of grass, then got inside her truck, locked the door, and sped to the main road.

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Rolling strata like formations of hunched lizards with their heads raised and their gillets hanging down whipped by. Ravens the size of cats strutted aggressively onto the road, stabbed their huge beaks at the soil, and hopped away in the wake of her car. Mobile homes replaced hogans, and shiny trucks replaced broken-down, rusting cars. In a backyard a woman hung washed clothing on a line. Pants jigged spasmodically in the wind.

Catherine swung around a curve. Out of nowhere a tractor-trailer roared past her and disappeared behind the bend, leaving in its wake a faint, eerie whine.

A traditional Dine family had both a winter hogan and a spring or summer hogan. They kept a herd of sheep or goats in a wind-protected corral during the harsh cold months and in warmer weather led the animals down the canyon to the wash, where the family began plowing and planting. The family might leave a hogan after someone died there, knocking a hole on the north side to provide an exit for the ghost and to warn others that it was a death hogan, but they would not otherwise desert it—unless they had been driven out. As Catherine figured, at least eight, possibly more, families had abandoned both winter and summer hogans, and of those eight, five had disabled members.

She called clinics, trading posts, schools, rodeos, anyone on the reservation who may have heard a rumor, no matter how far-fetched. A dozen or so telephone inquiries told her none of the families had lost members to sudden death. Some spoke of curio seekers. One or two had heard about looting below Gray Mesa. When she finished her last call, she knew she should turn the matter over to Officer Stillman. She knew the task ahead was no job for the uninitiated, or for a woman acting alone. But this was no longer a simple investigation—it had become a personal matter, one that intrinsically connected her with the past.

At sundown she drove to a desolate site west of Gray Mesa, where she positioned her truck overlooking Kaibito Wash. Flashlight in hand, she wandered in on foot, passing beneath the ruins of circular ceremonial kivas. She thought about her ancient ancestors who had traded with Mexico and the Southwest and who had long since vanished, leaving behind only lizards and ghosts to look out of crumbled dwellings at the vast desert.

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Silence hung in eternal repose. Light from her flashlight caught weeping walls of waterfalls and deep wounds of narrow gorges. She turned off the light to allow her eyes to adjust to the darkness, and felt herself become like a rock on a mountain, merging into the landscape. She moved discreetly with her ancestors' respect for the land, careful not to disturb the spirits of earth and air.

Fiery sparks rose from somewhere beyond the sand-choked channel where the wind seized drifts of tumbleweed. She rolled up her pants and waded through the warm wash, and made her way over sloping gravelly and sandy hills, in the outcroppings of which stood an occupied mobile home and hogan.

Voices broke the restive silence. She slid down a hill of noxious sulphuric-smelling salt to a flat ledge of hardened sandstone. Shadows of four or five robed figures swayed before an effigy of bones strung together by rope behind a bonfire. She had read about cults in journals but had never seen any. Now, seeing the robed figures below, suspecting their purpose was to frighten Indians out of their disability checks and livestock, she was angry.

She inserted a flash and, using a zoom lens, shot one frame after the next. Light ricocheted off the surrounding sandhills. Four figures scattered, disrobing, and were soon out of sight. But one came after her, climbing the embankment, shouting. She ran stumbling on all fours, terrified, out of the canyon, her blood pulsing in her eardrums. Like a migrant spirit she fled, sinking to her ankles in gravel at every step. A sudden wind raised protective barriers behind her of coarse sand which resembled drifted snow. Ahead, in the haphazard path of her flashlight, the occasional hogans lurked like ghostly warriors with beacons, appearing and disappearing as wind shifted sand in a blanket around them.

The white, exposed faces in the twenty or so photographs lining her desk looked lifeless and alien. Their discarded robes seemed strangely human.

"It's never-ending, isn't it?" Stillman asked in an oddly thin voice as he gathered the photographs into an evidence bag.

She nodded, grateful to be included in the implications. "At first I thought it was kids. When you realize the families thought they were being hunted by *chindi* and abandoned their homes—"

"And I'll bet every single check has been cashed."

"Yes. Some for years." She hadn't been taken advantage of, but she felt victimized all the same. She thought about her grandmother

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and great-grandmother, her entire lineage, about what it meant to be forced into exile—any kind of exile—and about being a statistic in some governmental file.

The clock had stopped again, at four fifty-five. She stood and reached for it, but Stillman took it from her, switched the batteries, and hung it back on its hook. As the big hand began its slow decisive sweep, he attempted a lopsided grin.

"It's how you handle it that counts," he said as he touched his wide-brim hat. "Perhaps we should make them work off the amounts they stole, right here in the heart of the res, where they'll have to look at Indians every day," he said with a hint of irony, before he walked into the evening.

She smiled at his notion of accountability. As the sound of his car faded into the distance, she thought about her clients, their low expectations, their infrequent anger, their resignation. In reaching beneath the desk for her purse, she realized she was too tired to drive. She took a blanket from the closet to wrap over her legs, then turned off the light and sat on a sofa in the dark, listening to the clock's ticking.

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a *NEW* short story by

DOUG ALLYN

Until he started writing short stories in 1985, EQMM *Readers Award winner Doug Allyn had never made his living any other way than by playing music with his band. Still on tour most nights, Mr. Allyn is firmly in touch with the music scene he always evokes so well in his fiction. . . .*

THE GHOST SHOW

by DOUG ALLYN

"That guy onstage is the sorriest lookin' Elvis I've ever seen," Wardell grumbled as I eased down on the barstool next to him. "Elvis never wore no horn-rims."

"He's supposed to be Buddy Holly, chump." Doc sighed, giving me a what-do-kids-know look behind Wardell's back. "He may not look much like Buddy, but he moves like him. Like he's been dead a helluva long time. Wonder where they dug him up?"

"They held auditions in Chicago," I said. "Cohen ran an ad in *Variety,* hired a hall, the works. The black guy who's doing the Jimi Hendrix act is great. Overall, the show's pretty good."

"They're all just actors though," Wardell groused. "We're the only real band on the bill."

"So we are," Doc said. "Stoney and the Bones are the only real band in a dead-stars revue, and the actors are gettin' paid more than we are. That tell you anything, Wardell?"

"Yeah. We'll be makin' steady money for a change," Wardell said sourly.

I caught the bartender's eye. "Jack Black on the rocks," I said. "Do it twice."

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"I thought you were on the wagon, Stoney," Wardell said.

"Singing's dusty work," I said. "Need a little lubrication for the pipes. How'd we sound, Doc?"

"Not bad for a first night, but Wardell's piano was a little loud and your guitar was thin. The bass and drums were solid. I'll tweak the sound setup tomorrow. How's your hand holdin' up?"

"Good as new," I lied. It hurt like hell, a painful reminder that motorcycles and trees are a bad mix. The bartender parked a double bourbon in front of me and I knocked back half of it at a single gulp. It cut a gully down my throat and exploded in the deep south. Velvet napalm. I sipped the rest of it slowly, scanning the room. Not a bad crowd for a show bar in Omaha. A mixed bag. Mostly stag flyboys from the airbase down the road, some cliques of yuppie singles and divorcees on the make. Doc wouldn't have any trouble finding temporary true love. His rugged puppy looks and shaggy blond mane would make him a trophy in a herd of half-smashed brush cuts.

The audience had applauded politely after our set, but I doubted that many of them knew who we were. Stoney and the Bones are strictly a golden oldies footnote now. People remember us as the band that introduced Bonnie McGee to the world. If they recall us at all. This crowd came for the beer and the rock-'n'-roll ghost show: Elvis, Buddy Holly, Jimi Hendrix, and a brand new act, the late, great Bonnie McGee.

"Anybody met the chick who's doin' Bonnie's act?" I asked.

Wardell shook his head.

"I stopped by her dressing room," Doc said. "You know, to say howdy, wish her luck."

"So?" I prompted. "Does she look much like Bonnie or not?"

"Not much." Doc shrugged. "Same size, I guess, but she ain't a redhead. She's got Bonnie's voice down pat though. I heard her singing in her room. Thought it was a record until I knocked."

"What's she like?"

"Neighborly. I said howdy, I'm Doc Feeny, road manager for the Bones. She told me to take a hike."

"Proves she's got taste, at least," I said.

"Maybe you shoulda worn a T-shirt without holes in it," Wardell said. "The grunge look's passé, Doc."

"The hippie look's comin' back," Doc said, "and so will the Bones. A hit song, a break or two, and we'll be big time again."

"Sure we will," Wardell said. "But while I'm waitin', think I'll crash back at the motel. We at the Holiday Inn?"

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"Third floor," Doc said. "And don't smoke anything nasty in your room. They've got security."

"What? And blow my chance at stardom?" Wardell smirked. "See ya, Stoney." He sauntered off.

I waved goodbye with my glass.

"That punk needs a personality transplant," Doc said.

"He may not be Mr. Warmth but he can flat play a piano. And it's not like we're married to him. He'll move on. The Bones have always been a revolving-door group, players come and go."

"Everybody but you and me," Doc said.

"Which blows the theory that we get smarter with age."

"Amen." Doc smiled and we touched glasses in a toast to nothing in particular. The pseudo–Buddy Holly ended his set with a lame version of "Peggy Sue." The Bonnie McGee act was next. I killed my drink and ordered two more. Insurance. I'd seen dead-rocker shows before, but never a ghost act of anyone I'd actually known. Or cared about. I caught Doc's eye and he slipped me a couple of Quaaludes under the table. I gulped 'em dry.

Len Cohen, the emcee/manager of the show, had worked with all the big acts at one time or another, including the Bones. He sprinted onstage, tall, dark, and geeky. His slicked, thinning hair and black tux made him look like an anorexic undertaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, here she is, the baddest biker mama of all time, back from her last tour in the land down under, and I mean *waayyy* down under! The one, the only, BONNIE McGEEEEE!!!"

The backup band kicked into the riff from "Ridin' the Iron," and Bonnie bopped into the spotlight. No problem. I felt nothing at all. For about five seconds. And then my heart stopped and my eyes were stinging, blurring my vision. I could barely see the stage. Which reinforced the jolt I'd felt that first instant. Time travel. It was Bonnie onstage. Sweet Jesus, it really was. Fiery red hair, black leather vest and spandex hotpants, tattoos on her arms and thighs, the way she moved . . .

I knocked back my second double without even tasting it.

She jumped into the first verse of the song. Doc was right, she sounded a lot like Bonnie. Exactly like her, in fact. I tried to pick out a flaw: tone, accent, anything. I couldn't find one. She was perfect. Perfect.

I closed my eyes, letting the music wash over me, and the memories. Feeling the buzz from the bourbon and the drugs kick in, letting Bonnie's voice take me higher than I'd been in years.

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The ghost singer did Bonnie's set, song for song, note for note, exactly the way I remembered it. The way I'd heard it in my head a thousand times over the past ten years. And somewhere midway through the set, in the muddle of my mind, the germ of an idea took root and began to grow. A boozy fantasy that gradually solidified into a conviction.

I was hearing an encore. It really was Bonnie up there. Somehow she'd found a way to come back. She'd fought her way through the darkness or whatever was on the other side. And she'd returned to the place she was most alive. On a stage, in the spotlights, a band jamming behind her, amid the smoke and din of a rock-'n'-roll saloon. She'd come back to it. And to me.

I knew it was crazy, but between the booze and the Quaaludes and the pain of loss I'd been carrying all these years. . . . Each song intensified the idea, until I was almost sure it was true. Almost.

"Doc?" I said quietly. "Do you hear what I hear?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nobody's that good an imitator. Nobody could be. I think that's really Bonnie up there."

"You mean a tape? Nah, I helped Len's crew set up the PA system. It's not rigged for a lip sync. She's singing live."

"I know. That's what I mean. Check her out. Her voice, the way she moves, everything. I really think it's her, Doc. Somehow she . . . I don't know. She's come back."

Doc scanned my eyes, looking for a smile. We've got a history, Doc and me. He can read me. "What the hell?" he said slowly, "you're serious, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said, swallowing. "I think I am."

Doc swiveled to face the stage, frowning. He seemed suddenly uneasy. "Well?" I said.

"I don't know, man," Doc said. "I admit it sounds a whole lot like her, but . . . Hell, Stoney, that's crazy. Dead people can't come back."

"Sure they can. Happens all the time. We call 'em ghosts," I said, standing up. Too fast. The room wobbled on its axis. "And this *is* a ghost show, right?"

"Yo, partner," Doc said, steadying my arm. "You okay?"

I pulled away from him and threaded my way through the crowd toward the stage. Slow going. The floor was pitching like a cruise ship in a rough sea. Tables kept blundering into my way. She saw me coming. She seemed to be singing to me, drawing me deep into her eyes . . .

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Her eyes. They seemed different. Darker than I remembered. Colder. I couldn't seem to focus on them. I needed to get closer. I vaulted up on the stage, stumbled to one knee, then stood up.

"Hey, boys and girls, look who's here," she said, grinning at me across the stage. "It's my old singing partner, the guy that gave me my big break, Mr. Keith Stone. Give him a hand, maybe we can do a few of our hits together."

One of the stage crew shoved a microphone in my hand. I eyed it stupidly for a moment, then dropped it. It hit the stage with a thump amplified into a thunderclap. Bonnie froze and the room fell silent. Up close her face seemed to be wavering, as though I was seeing her through a waterfall. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

"Bonnie?" I said.

"He's trashed," a stagehand said. "Get him the hell off." Somebody grabbed my arm. I tried to shake loose and couldn't quite manage.

"Bonnie?" I said again, squinting at her through the fog in my head. "It's you, isn't it?"

She hesitated a moment, glaring at me. And then she smiled. But with no warmth. "Yo, Keith, *maly bracie*. You didn't think you'd get rid of me that easy, did you?" Bonnie said. And in that instant I *knew*. Knew it to the core of my soul. It was Bonnie. But I couldn't seem to bring her into focus, or even stay on my feet. The stage was revolving like a wobbly turntable, picking up speed, spinning. And I was going down. . . .

My left eye wouldn't open. It was gummed shut, as if somebody'd licked it and tried to mail it to Seattle. The right one worked though. I could see my feet. Socks. Somebody'd taken my boots off and tossed a blanket over me. Doc, probably. Motel room. Right. Holiday Inn. Omaha. I risked a slow look around.

Len Cohen was hunched into a question mark, scowling over a newspaper at the dressing table. He'd traded in his tux for a rumpled sport coat, knit tie, cotton Dockers. Doc was sprawled across an armchair reading a *Mad* magazine. He was wearing faded jeans and a T-shirt. From last night? Hard to say. He seldom wears anything else. Sunlight glowed around the window blinds. Morning sun? Afternoon? Couldn't be sure.

"Good morning, butthole," Len growled.

I sat up, slowly, slowly. The room lurched. So did my stomach. I felt flat as a road-killed possum in a truck-stop driveway. I wanted to groan and die, but wouldn't give Len the satisfaction. Doc unfolded

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himself from the chair and poured me a cup of coffee from a carafe on the nightstand. It was lukewarm. Black, with triple sugar and laced with amphetamines. Doc Feeny's surefire cure for a morning after. I gulped half of it down and felt the amphetamines kick in. And decided I might just survive after all. And it'd serve me right.

"So," I croaked, "Doc said we sounded a little rusty last night."

"You sounded adequate," Len conceded. "It was the show you put on afterwards that's bothering me. When I offered you the gig you promised you'd stay straight, Stoney. What the hell happened?"

"It was tougher than I expected," I said slowly, remembering. "Hearing those songs again and especially . . . seeing Bonnie again."

"Yeah, that chick does a heckuva job, doesn't she? Her name's Carol Anspach. Best imitator I've ever seen, and I've seen 'em all."

"But that's the thing, Len. She seemed real to me. Not an act at all. It was like Bonnie'd come back somehow."

"Get real. That wasn't Bonnie onstage last night any more than it was Elvis or Hendrix. Or were you so wrecked you thought they were real too?"

"I know it sounds crazy but, look, you know me, Len. I may be a little wild, but I'm not nuts. I swear I thought it was her."

"Correction. I used to know you, Stoney, back when you were still somebody. But in case you've been smoking something extra heavy-duty, here's a reality check for you. Forget the tabloids that claim she's been spotted everyplace from Nome to Armpit, Idaho. Bonnie's long gone. She died of a drug overdose in Australia ten years ago. I even had the dubious honor of identifying her body afterwards. If you hadn't been in traction from cracking up your 'cycle you could have attended her funeral yourself."

"I know, I don't mean it was *really* her, but . . . Dammit, Len, I'm telling you there was something uncanny about her voice, her moves, everything. Doc noticed it too. And when I got on stage she said something to me."

"Like what?" Len asked.

"I . . . can't remember. But it was definitely Bonnie's voice. Do you think I wouldn't know her voice?"

"Maybe she was possessed," Doc offered drily, winking at Len over the top of his magazine. "Maybe Bonnie took over whatsername somehow. You know, like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist?*"

"The Exorcist, right," Len echoed. "Very funny, Doc. Only I'm not laughing. Now listen up, you two burnouts. That wasn't Bonnie last night, and it wasn't her ghost or whatever. She's an actress from

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Chicago named Carol Anspach. She did a Janis Joplin act in Vegas for a while, and now she's doing Bonnie. She's damn good, audiences like her, and I think we've all got a shot at making some serious bucks here. But you'd better get this straight: Carol's the headliner for this show, not the Bones. I signed your group on because I figured the show'd be more realistic with you as an opening act, but my God, if you give me any more trouble I'll fire your sorry butts in a New York minute."

"So why don't you?" I said.

"Because believe it or not, that little episode last night actually got us some pretty good ink," he said, waving the paper at me. "The music critic of the *World-Herald* said Carol's so good she even fooled you. So if you want to rave at reporters about how Bonnie's really come back, be my guest. But don't try it as an excuse for getting wrecked again, Stoney. You stay straight from here on or you're gone. And just to show you I'm serious, Doc, you're fired."

"No he's not," I said. "He's been with the Bones from the beginning and in the old days there were plenty of times you were damned glad Doc was along. How many shows did he get us through when we were in no shape to play?"

"You really don't get it, do you?" Cohen sighed. "Maybe if your pal Dr. Feelgood isn't around to pick you up when you're too wrecked to play you won't get wrecked quite so often."

"Don't blame that on Doc. We've all been legal grownups for a while now. And unless you'd like me to tell that music critic last night's little scene was your idea, Doc stays."

"Fine, have it your way," Len said, unfolding himself from the chair. "But we'd better be clear on this, Stoney. The old days are gone. As dead as Joplin or Hendrix or Bonnie. It's all show biz now. You want to work, you stay straight."

"I will. It won't happen again."

"It better not," he said, pausing in the doorway. "You know, you could be right, though. Maybe Bonnie did come back for a minute last night. To remind you what happens when dopers get careless."

"Screw you, Len," I said.

His face darkened and for a moment I thought I'd pushed him too far. But he must've figured the Bones could still make him a few bucks. He slammed the door on his way out.

"Thanks," Doc said.

"De nada," I said. "I mean it. You're the best roadie in the business and you've saved my tail more times than I can count."

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"You want some pills?" Doc said, reading my eyes. "You look like you need 'em."

"Nah, I'd better pass, Doc. Len was serious and we definitely need the work."

"Whatever. Look, what you said before about Bonnie comin' back. Do you really believe that?"

"I don't know," I said slowly. "Len's right. I was blown away. That's probably all it was. A bad trip."

"Maybe," he said doubtfully. "I didn't wanna say anything with Len here. But I was straight, Keith, and she seemed so real she scared the hell out of me too."

"C'mon, Doc, after that monster Texas biker caught you with his mama I didn't figure anything'd ever scare you again."

"That dude was porky enough I figured I could outrun him," Doc said, smiling faintly. "How do you outrun a ghost?"

He was half serious. I know Doc's face as well as my own. I can't always tell when he's kidding. But I know when he definitely isn't.

"All right," I said slowly, "maybe we'd better settle this one way or the other. What did Len say that chick's name was?"

"Which one is she?" I asked, scanning the crowded restaurant.

"There, in the corner booth, readin' the book," Doc said, glancing at me curiously. "You saw her last night."

"Not very clearly," I said. "She looks different in daylight."

"Don't they all. Look, I gotta make a phone call," Doc said. "I'll catch up with you later."

"Whatever," I said absently as Doc faded into the crush. The girl in the corner didn't look anything like Bonnie. Same size maybe, same slender build, but her hair and eyes were dark, and her oversized glasses and Cornhuskers sweatshirt made her look like a college coed. Pre-law. I worked through the crowd toward her table. She had a good face: wide-set eyes, aquiline nose, hair cropped close. Not punk, just short. She glanced up as I approached. If she was concerned, she hid it well. Good for her.

"Hi," I said. "I think I fell on my face before we were properly introduced last night. I'm Keith Stone."

"So I gathered," she said. "I've heard a lot about you. Mostly bad. And you certainly lived up to your reputation. What do you want?"

"For openers, to apologize," I said, sliding into the booth across from her. "I'm really sorry about what happened."

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"Apologies don't cut much ice with me, Mr. Stone. Opening nights are tough enough without having a drunk crash my act."

"I know," I said, feeling myself flush. "I, ahm . . . I was upset. I guess I went a little heavy on the anesthetic."

"From your rep, I take it you get upset quite a lot. What was the problem last night?"

"I saw a ghost. Or thought I did. You must be really terrific at what you do, miss. You actually made me believe . . ." I swallowed, and looked away.

"Len told me what you said," she said, cocking her head, looking me over for the first time. "I thought he was joking. Maybe I should be flattered, but in the shape you were in, you would've seen Easter bunnies next."

"No," I said, "it wasn't just booze. It was your voice, the way you moved on stage, everything."

She shrugged. "I'm an actress. An interpretive artist. I used to do Joplin, now I do Bonnie. Maybe I'll never be as good as they were, but I try. I do research, I rehearse like a dog, and I take my work seriously. Which is more than you ever did."

"You don't like me, do you? And I get the feeling that it's about more than just last night. What's your problem?"

"Maybe I just resent what self-destructive jerks like you do to yourselves. And what you did to her."

"Did to *her*? Lady, you've got it exactly backwards. She was nobody when I met her. Joining the Bones was her big break. We had a few hits together, made some serious money. Then I cracked up a motorcycle and she quit us to go solo while I was still in the hospital. Didn't even say goodbye. Not that I hold that against her. It was the smart move and Bonnie was always smart. Still, if anybody owed anybody, she owed me."

"Did she? When you hired her, you hadn't written a hit in quite awhile and your band was on the skids. She helped put the Bones back on top again. And she was dead within a year."

"And you blame me for it? Figure I led her astray or something? Lady, why do you think her arms and legs were tattooed? Sure it gave her a terrific rock-'n'-roll image. But it also camouflaged needle tracks pretty well. I've got my flaws, but I've never turned anybody onto drugs in my life. She was a user when I met her, and I was ten thousand miles away when she overdosed."

"Methinks the gentleman protests too much."

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"Bull. I just got steamrolled by some heavy memories last night. Maybe it was because I never got the chance to say goodbye, or even to go to her funeral, I don't know," I said, sliding out of the booth. "Look, I've apologized and that's the best I can do. And don't worry about it happening again. Up close, minus the red wig, you're nothing like her. Nothing at all."

"You're right, I'm not. I'm just good at what I do. And so are you, when you try. I caught your set last night. I was impressed. If you think you can stay sober long enough maybe we can work up a couple of the songs you and Bonnie did together. It could punch up the act."

"No thanks, lady. I may be a has-been working in a damned ghost show, but I'm not down to mooching off a dead girl's talent like a freaking graverobber."

She flinched, her face reddened as though I'd slapped her. She stared down at the table a moment, focusing on the pattern in the Formica. And when she looked up, she'd changed. Her eyes were burning, transformed, as though something was ablaze in her soul. "Yo, Keith, *maly bracie*. You think you'd get rid of me that easy? I'll be back."

It was Bonnie's voice. Unmistakably. My blood chilled, freezing my heart in place. And then her eyes seemed to melt. And she spoke again in her own voice. "You see, Mr. Stone," she said coldly, "it's not just wigs and makeup. It's art. And the only crime in art is to piss away your talent the way you have. Or to destroy someone else's. Now take a walk."

For a moment I couldn't speak. "What the hell is this?" I managed at last. "Who are you?" She ignored me, staring out the window as though I'd already gone. I turned, and bumped into Doc. I didn't know how long he'd been there, or what he'd heard, but his face was ashen. He looked as shaken as I felt.

The show finished the week in Omaha, then moved south for a weekend stand in Lincoln. Opening night was rough. My guitar amp shut down on me twice. The second time I kicked it halfway across the stage. The audience loved it. Len wasn't amused, but I felt a bit better. Temporarily.

The next night was a lot worse. As we finished our set and the curtain came down, the lights winked off for a moment. And Bonnie said, "You think you could get rid of me that easy? That easy?"

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It was Bonnie again. I swear to God it was. Her voice was muffled, but it seemed to surround us. Then the backstage lights came on. The whole thing hadn't taken three seconds.

Len's crew was already shifting the equipment, getting ready for the Hendrix act. Doc stalked onstage from the wings and I tossed him my guitar. "Where's Anspach?" I snapped. "I've had enough of this garbage!"

"Forget it," Doc said grimly. "It wasn't her."

"What do you mean? Of course—"

"Stoney, she was standing five feet from me talkin' to Len when it happened. Besides, that was Bonnie's voice. And we both know it."

"But . . . Dammit, Doc, what are we gonna do?"

"Do?" he echoed. "Nothing. We do nothing, say nothing. Just keep on truckin' like it didn't happen. If somebody's runnin' a game on us, eventually they'll get bored. And if they're not . . . Hell, if Bonnie really comes back we'll work her into our show, tell Len to cut Anspach loose and give the rest of us a raise."

He was grinning, but there was an edge to him, a wildness in his eyes I hadn't seen in years. He was definitely spooked, but there was no dog in him. He wouldn't run scared. And if he could handle it, so could I.

I sighed. "Right. Maybe we oughta set up an extra mike for Bonnie. She wasn't very loud."

"She was loud enough," he said, his smile fading. "I heard her just fine."

The show finished the run in Lincoln without any more incidents, then we packed up and rolled east into Iowa for a string of one-nighters. Des Moines, Sioux City, after the third or fourth town I lost track. A shakedown cruise, working out the glitches in low-rent saloons and concert halls, getting ready for bigger dates in Chicago and Vegas.

Usually the players on a tour coalesce into a kind of extended family, a kinship of the craftsmen, all in the same bus chasing a neon rainbow. It's one of the pleasures of life on the road. It didn't happen with this show.

We were a house divided. I avoided Carol Anspach, and vice versa. We didn't talk, or catch each other's acts. The Bones opened every show but I'd split as soon as we finished. I told Len Cohen I was staying out of the bars to avoid temptation. But the truth was, I was ducking Anspach like a dog who'd been kicked. And the bars weren't

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the real danger anyway. It was the sense of déjà vu, as though touring with Bonnie's ghost had revived my own private demons. And brought the crazy days back. I found myself falling back on old standbys, booze and poppers. But I didn't have the constitution for it anymore. Often I was too high or too low to do the show. Without Doc and his stash I couldn't have made it.

Len knew what was going on, of course. But he didn't say anything. He wouldn't, as long as I could do my act. Hell, maybe he was hoping I'd OD too, so he could hire an actor to play me. Someone easier to control. Another square peg for his square new order.

He was right, times had changed. The people in the ghost show didn't drink or smoke. They read, or listened to self-improvement tapes on headsets. They did calisthenics at roadside rest stops. The guys in their road crew even wore matching coveralls with the show's logo on the back. Clones, the lot of 'em.

The Bones? We'd sit in the back of the bus and play high-stakes pinochle, or jam for hours on battered guitars, playing old songs or working up new ones. But mostly we played the old songs.

Doc was as edgy as I was. He hid it behind a wall of wisecracks, but I knew this thing was chewing at him. I'd catch him staring at odd moments, looking off to another place, some other time. We went back forever, Doc and me. We'd survived bar fights, bad dope, bum gigs, and crooked promoters. We were hardened rock-'n'-roll road warriors. But being part of a ghost show made us feel ancient, like dinosaurs blundering through a blizzard. Doc tried to kid me out of my funk. He said it was like *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* had happened for real, and the Bones were the last people on earth who hadn't popped out of pods. The truth was, the Bones clung together like ragtag remnants of a defeated army. Surrounded. And outnumbered.

Until Doc evened the odds a little. He hired a new guy, an honest to God hippie throwback we picked up at a rest stop in Iowa. He called himself Gopher. I doubt he could remember his real name. His eyes were as empty as the bottom of a beer mug, but he was a free spirit, willing to work for food, a place to crash, and an occasional pop out of Doc's bag. He flatly refused to wear road-crew coveralls, called them fascist. So Doc quit wearing them too. Maybe the Bones weren't stars anymore, but by God we had our own road crew again, in torn denims and headbands and hair down to their waists. Scruffs defiant.

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The one thing Doc wouldn't talk about was the ghost. I brought the subject up a couple of times but he blew me off. Said he didn't want to encourage my delusions. And he was right. Hell, I knew it was all a scam and Anspach was just an actress. I *knew* it. She'd learned to sing like Bonnie the way a parrot learns, by listening to records and mimicking the nuances. But what she'd said to me in the restaurant, and the voice we heard onstage in the dark . . . Remembering it raised the hair on the back of my neck.

Haunted or not, the ghost show's bad luck continued. The bus broke down on Highway 80 just west of Moline. We were stuck waiting for repairs most of the day and barely made it to Peoria in time to set up for the show. Len had booked a weekender in an American Legion hall, a barn of a place with hardwood floors and acoustics like the inside of an oil barrel. There were no dressing rooms, and the hall was jammed, standing room only by nine o'clock.

The Bones opened the show and got a pretty good response. It was an older crowd, definitely Geritol generation. They remembered us, or freaks like us, from their lost rock-'n'-roll youth.

The rest of the band split for the bus to play cards, but I stayed. I'd been stuck in the bus long enough for one day, and anyway, I was curious. I was ready to see how real Anspach's act would seem if I watched her from the wings, cold sober.

I didn't get the chance to find out. Len gave his usual spiel, the backup band kicked into the first song, and Bonnie/Carol came bopping out. I focused on her with every atom of concentration I could muster, trying to see past the wig, to remember the face of the woman I'd talked to in the restaurant. But I couldn't seem to separate them. Memories of Bonnie kept superimposing themselves on her imitator. If Anspach saw me standing there, she gave no sign. She spun to face the audience, grabbed the mike stand. And froze.

For a moment I thought it was stage fright—nobody ever truly loses it. But then I saw a faint wisp of steam from her fist where she was holding the stand. And realized she was burning.

"She's frying! Kill the power," I yelled at the roadies as I sprinted onstage. I slammed into Bonnie shoulder first in a flying tackle, spinning her away from the microphone, knocking her into a heap in the corner. Her eyes were glassy and her palm was seared from the electrical shock she'd received. She wasn't breathing. I tried to start mouth-to-mouth but one of Len's road crew thought I'd freaked and dragged me off. I took a swing at him, and then went down under a pile of clones in blue coveralls.

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Len caught up with me at the motel desk, checking in.

"You oughta get that knot on your temple looked at," he said, eyeing me critically.

"I've been hurt worse falling off barstools. How's your star?"

"The emergency room treated her for shock, second-degree burns on her hand, and bruised ribs. Did you have to hit her so hard?"

"I didn't have to hit her at all. I could have let her toast to a golden brown. What the hell happened?"

"That burned-out roadie Doc hired back in Iowa, what's his name? Gopher?"

I nodded.

"He pinched a frayed power cord underneath the mike stand. Carol caught a hundred and twenty volts as soon as she touched it. She was lucky you were handy."

"If she was lucky it wouldn't have happened at all. And what makes you think it was Gopher's fault? It could have been one of your crew."

"Nah, it was Gopher. Doc admitted it and even apologized, which is a first. He's already cut him loose. But from now on if you want to hire the handicapped, clear it with me, understand?"

"Yassuh, Boss. Is Anspach still in the hospital?"

"Nope, they released her. She's up in her room, resting. She feels pretty rocky."

"Yeah," I said. "I'll bet she does."

It took her nearly ten minutes to answer my knock. She looked like a train wreck, but somehow no less attractive for it. Wearing an oversized bathrobe, her dark hair a tousled shambles, she could have passed for her own sickly sister. Her left hand was wrapped in greasy gauze and her eyes were dazed. Good.

"Hi," she said. "I guess I owe you a thank you. Thank you. And good night." She started to close the door, but I caught it.

"Sorry, but it ain't gonna be that simple. First let's get you back in bed where you belong," I said, pushing her gently into the room. "Then we have to talk. It's important."

"If it's about your friend being fired—"

"It's about him and a lot more. I need your help. Please." She let me lead her to the bed. She eased down on the edge of it, blinking, trying to collect herself.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

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"I don't know," she said honestly. "My hand hurts and I'm half in the bag from the painkillers they gave me at the hospital. Which is an average day for you, right?"

"That's more like it," I said. "For a minute there I thought you were going to be civil."

"A lapse," she said, eyeing me warily. "It won't happen again. Now what do you want exactly?"

"I'm not sure. I guess I want you to break a mirror for me."

"Come again?"

"A mirror. Like in a fun house? I feel like I'm lost in a roomful of mirrors. People are getting hurt and I can't see what's happening or find my way out. But somehow I think you know the way out."

"Are you high or something? You're not making any sense."

"Look, I know you've got no use for me, but dammit, I saved your neck tonight. You owe me, lady. At least a mirror's worth."

"I see. And which mirror would that be?"

"Just explain one thing to me. That first night, I thought you sounded exactly like Bonnie. So much that I thought she'd— I don't know. Come back for one last encore or something. It was crazy, but I was stoned and that's what I thought. The next day though, I was straight, more or less, and you still sounded exactly like her. Even called me molly brochia, or something like that. Hell, I can't even pronounce it, but you could. Bonnie used to call me that sometimes. But only in private. You couldn't have gotten that off a record."

"No," she said. "I didn't. And before you ask, that bit back in Lincoln, when you heard the voice in the dark? I had one of the stagehands rig a cordless mike to play through one of your amps. Consider it a payback for messing up my opening night."

"You mean that was your voice?"

"No, it was Bonnie's. Look, explaining it would take more energy than I've got right now," she said, wincing as she tried to take a deep breath. "But I can show you. If you're sure you're up to it."

"Lady, at this point I'm ready for anything."

"There's a box in the closet. Get it for me."

"What's in it? A Ouija board?"

"No," she said, easing back against the pillows. "Something much better."

It was a portable VCR, and a few videocassettes. I glanced the question at her, but her eyes were closed.

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"The tapes with numbers on them are bootleg videos of Bonnie when she was still with the Bones," she said without opening her eyes. "The third tape is the one you want. Len bought it from Bonnie's brother. *Maly bracie.*"

"What?"

"That's what it means. Little brother. In Polish."

"Bonnie was Irish."

"Her mother was Polish," she said. "An immigrant straight from the old country. Very uptight, which is why the family would never talk to the press about her. They were ashamed of the way she died." She sagged back into her pillow, pursing her lips against the pain in her hand. I hooked the VCR up to the TV set, turned the volume down, and inserted the cassette.

The tape was a pastiche, a collection of 8mm home movies transferred onto videotape. They weren't in any particular order and they'd been hacked up pretty badly to delete segments without Bonnie. It opened with her eighth-grade graduation, cut to Bonnie and another girl singing country music in a high-school gym, cut to a church picnic, Bonnie watching a mob of kids in plaid shirts and overalls play softball, cut to Bonnie singing in a local folkie bar, one of the songs she'd mailed to my record company. I'd liked the tune so much I asked her to come out to L.A. for an audition. . . . I stopped the tape, swallowing hard.

And realized Anspach was watching me. "Jesus," I said, "she was just . . . a hick. The tattoos, all that biker mama stuff, it was just a front. I don't understand."

"You might if you were a woman," Carol said. "She was coming out for a tryout with the Bones, right? A group with a reputation for being stone rock-'n'-roll crazies. She knew it was her big break and she'd have to fit in to make it. So she tried life in the fast lane. Your life. And it killed her."

"Look, I know it may look that way, but I swear she was already heavy into drugs when I met her. I didn't turn her on to anything. Hell, before she left she was stumbling around like a wino after every show."

"And did your pal Doc help her out?"

"She never hit on Doc for so much as a speeder that I knew of, and I would have known. Whatever happened to her, she did to herself."

"It doesn't matter now," she said, leaning back, closing her eyes again. "There's only a few minutes on the tape. You'd better see the rest of it."

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I switched the VCR on. Bonnie finished the song. . . . Cut to the Bonnie I remembered, tattooed arms, hair cut short and spiky. She was sitting in a dressing room, holding a guitar. "Yo, Stoney, *maly bracie,*" she said, to the camera, and to me. "You think you can get rid of me that easy? I'll be back. But first I've got some thinking to do. And so have you. We've got a lot to talk about, you and me. Meanwhile, I've got half a song here. It needs a bridge and a final chorus. Give a listen." She played a brief introduction to the song, then sang two verses. "That's as far as I've taken it. Give it your best shot and we'll polish it up together when I get back. And don't worry, I'll be back." She reached toward the screen to turn the camera off. . . .

Cut to Bonnie, age thirteen or so, walking hesitantly into a living room wearing a white confirmation dress. I stopped the tape and sat there a few minutes, getting my breathing under control. Then I turned and met Carol's eyes.

"You've had this all along?" I said wonderingly. "Knowing she made it for me? That's cold, lady. Damn, but that's cold."

"Maybe it is. Actually, I intended to give it to you, but after that first night I changed my mind, decided to use it to run a game on you instead. Besides, it's obvious from the clip that she left the group to get away from the life you were in. Only she didn't make it. Whether you meant to or not, you destroyed her."

"That's not true," I said.

"Perhaps you just don't want to believe it."

"It's more than that. And anyway, there's something wrong with this film."

"What do you mean, wrong?"

"I'm not sure, but . . . Something's missing. Or there's something I'm not seeing. Can I watch it again? I'll take it back to my room if you want to rest."

"Watch it here," she said, closing her eyes. "I'd rather not be alone and the tape won't bother me. I know it . . . by heart."

Her voice faded. I think she was asleep before she finished speaking. I rewound the tape and watched it again, beginning to end. And then again. But it wasn't until the fourth or fifth time through that I realized what I'd missed earlier. Two things really. The twenty-year-old Bonnie singing in the little saloon didn't have any tattoos. But when we met a few months later, she looked like the biker mama she pretended to be. Tattoos on her arms and thighs to cover needle tracks. But even more important, in the last segment, of her

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confirmation day, if I looked past her carefully, I could see into a bedroom.

The room was out of focus, and I couldn't be sure it was hers. But I think it was. Because there was a kit on the nightstand beside the bed. A shooting kit. Cotton balls, a small bottle of alcohol, and a hypodermic syringe. And at the time, Bonnie couldn't have been more than thirteen years old.

Len opened the door in his pajamas, blinking. He looked at me with disbelief, then at his watch. "What the hell, Stoney, it's five in the damn morning. What's wrong?"

"Everything. I need to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About Bonnie," I said, pushing past him into the room. "I need to know what happened to her, Len. Exactly."

"Now? Can't it wait until morning?"

"No, it's waited too long already. Please, Len. It's important."

He hesitated, reading my eyes, and either figured I was dead serious or completely around the bend. "You know what happened," he said sourly, stepping back into the room. "Everybody does. She overdosed. Collapsed onstage. Ambulance took her to a hospital, but she died the next day without regaining consciousness."

"Died of what? Specifically, I mean? What was she on?"

"Hell, I don't know, some kind of heroin speedball mix."

"Where did she get it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The tour was just starting. You'd only been in the country a few days. Where did she get the stuff?"

"She walked it through customs. Damnedest thing I ever saw."

"Walked it through? How?"

"She had some official paperwork that said she was diabetic and had permission to bring some vials of insulin into the country. She had the harder stuff mixed in with it. The cops found it in the fridge in her dressing room. The hell of it was, the coroner who did the autopsy said she really was diabetic. Apparently had been all her life. She was the last person in the world who should have been using. Did you know?"

"No," I said, shaking my head slowly. "I guess there was a helluva lot I didn't know. Or was too buzzed to notice. Why didn't all this come out at the time?"

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"The local law clamped a lid on it. Didn't want to publicize how easy it'd been to get drugs into the country. Which was okay by me. All I wanted was to get the hell out of there. Funny, I thought getting Bonnie away from you would be good for her. Thought you were a bad influence, that she'd be okay on her own. But I guess you weren't the problem after all. Or at least not the way I figured."

"Meaning what?"

"Nothing," Len said, glancing away. "Forget it."

"Jesus, don't jerk me around, Len. It's too late for games. Dammit, I have to know!"

"Fine, you want it all, sport? Here it is. Bonnie was pregnant!" he snapped. "Nearly three months along. They said she probably misjudged her fix because her body chemistry was changing."

"My God," someone said softly. Me, I guess. I sat down slowly on the edge of Len's rumpled bed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you like . . . Ah hell, we were all a little crazy back then. The mistakes we made, we just have to live with 'em. They're history, Stoney. It's over."

"But that's just it. It's not over. I've got this awful feeling that it's all coming back, Len, and it's going to end just as ugly. Maybe it's bad karma or something, hell, I don't know. Bonnie getting hurt tonight helped me see it, but I think it's been there all along."

"Stoney," Len said carefully, "Bonnie didn't get hurt tonight. Carol did."

"Right," I said. "That's what I meant."

I found myself walking along a side street. Wasn't sure where I was and it didn't matter. I've been in hundreds of towns that I've never seen in daylight. You roll in, do a show, move on. It's the life. After a while it seems normal. Almost. But I felt disconnected now. Like I was finally an honest to God member of the ghost show. My own ghost, drifting like smoke.

The videotape. It kept replaying in my head, frame by frame, superimposing itself on darkened shop windows and the sides of passing trucks. I glimpsed Bonnie's smile in gutters, the glow of her eyes in alley shadows. At times I heard the song. Two lonely verses repeating endlessly like an old 45 stuck in a groove. Or it'd just be a whisper of her voice on the wind. Her last message to me. Nothing profound, just a few sentences. But it troubled me. There was something unfinished about it, something . . . And after a while I realized what it was.

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She hadn't said goodbye to me. Not in life, or on the tape. The last thing she said was: "I'll be back."

"I'll be back."

I could hear the drone of the television through the hotel door. I rapped twice, then again once, our signal for all clear. Doc peered cautiously out past the chain lock, then unhooked it and let me in.

"What's up?" he said, blearily massaging his eyes. He was barefoot, wearing briefs and a T-shirt. I'd seen him this way before countless times. It seemed oddly intimate now. "Kinda early, isn't it?" he said.

"I went to see Anspach," I said, glancing around the anonymous room, the rumpled bed. "We had a long talk."

"Looks like you musta talked all night. Next show's not till nine. I can do you a couple downers if you wanna zone out."

"You've got a stash here?" I asked, surprised.

"With all the excitement I didn't have time to stow it proper. It's in the tank. You want some 'ludes?"

"Why not?" I trailed him to the john, watched as he popped the toilet top and took out a flat, book-sized parcel sealed in a waterproof plastic Baggie. He expertly flicked the bag open with a fingernail and popped the box top. "Two enough?"

"For now," I said, cupping them in my palm. "Funny, whenever I need to get up or down you're always handy. Like the power company or something."

"The power company?"

"Sure. When you turn on the lights, you never think about where the juice comes from. You're like that. Doc Feeny, Dr. Feelgood. The power company."

"That's one way to look at it," Doc said warily, reading my eyes. "Somethin's up besides us, isn't it? What's wrong?"

"Not much," I said. "Just my whole damn life."

"That's a relief," Doc snorted. "For a minute there I thought it might be serious. Wanna narrow that down a little?"

"Sure. Let's start with Gopher. Len said you fired him."

"Had to. Hated to roll over on a buddy, but he was too far gone, man, a total screwup. He coulda killed that chick. I shoulda realized how blown he was. Never shoulda taken him on."

I stared at him a long time, reading his face. His very familiar face. "C'mon, Doc, all the time we've been together, I probably know you better'n your mama. Lie to her if you want, but not me. You

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knew exactly how blown away Gopher was. That's *why* you hired him. To take the fall for Anspach's accident. Hell, he's so burned out he probably thinks he really did it."

"But you don't?"

"I know he didn't. Because I know you. You're an ace roadie, one of the best in the biz. Much too good to make a mistake like that or let some screwup make it either. That was no accident. You set her up to get burned, maybe killed. I knew it from the first. I just couldn't figure why you'd do it. Ghost show or not, we're makin' more money than we've seen in years. It didn't make sense. Until I realized it wasn't her you were trying to get at. It was Bonnie. Wasn't it?"

"That's crazy! Bonnie's dead, dammit."

"But sometimes the dead come back. Hell, Doc, it's what we've both been thinking. That the ghost in our show is real."

He nodded, swallowing hard. "That day in the restaurant . . . We both saw it, heard it, in broad daylight. And then that night in the dark . . . That was Bonnie. No question. I haven't hardly slept since. Afraid to. Doin' speeders till I'm startin' to see the walls crawl. I hadda do somethin' about it or flip out altogether."

"Relax, Doc. It's over. There's no ghost. At least not the usual kind. Anspach got a videotape from Bonnie's family, a bunch of home movies cobbled together. That's how she made her act so perfect. That and pure talent. She's really good. Good enough to make us both believe in ghosts."

"You're sayin' she's been fakin' it? But that voice we heard in Lincoln couldn't have been her."

"She had a stagehand run a tape of Bonnie's voice through a cordless mike. Simple. If we'd had our heads on straight we'd have figured it out. But we haven't been straight. Either of us. It was easy for Anspach to mess with our minds. Or what's left of 'em."

"Sweet Jesus Jenny on a bicycle," Doc said, slumping to the edge of the bed, burying his face in his hands, "I swear to God, Stoney. This thing's makin' me crazy. All I could think of was if I could run Anspach off, Bonnie'd go with her."

"I figured it had to be something like that. Pretty risky, though. You might've killed her. And that bothered me. The idea that you were scared enough to risk killing somebody. Hell, Doc, you've got the guts of a burglar. Or a dope dealer. I could only come up with one reason you'd be afraid of Bonnie, dead or alive. Because you thought she'd come back for you. Didn't you?"

"You know, don't you?" he said slowly, looking up at me.

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"Most of it," I said. "It's there on the video if you know what to look for. Tell me the rest."

"Bonnie lit into me while you were in the hospital. Blamed me because you were stoned when you cracked up your bike. Called me a damn cancer. Like it's my fault you like to cop a buzz once in a while. And you know it's not true."

"No," I agreed. "When I get trashed it's nobody's fault but mine. So what happened?"

"She got the offer for the solo tour. Said she was gonna get some bucks together and get you straightened out when she got back. And get rid of me. So I decided to run a little game on her. I found her stash. She had it hid in some medicine bottles in the fridge. Probably thought she'd get it past customs that way. I boosted the dose on a couple of 'em. Christ, I swear I never meant to really hurt her. I just figured she'd conk out or freak enough to get busted by the law. She'd draw a little slam time and forget about us. We'd go on like always."

"An accidental overdose?" I said softly. "Is that it?"

"That's exactly what it was, man. I still can't figure out how it went wrong. I didn't boost 'em much."

"It didn't take much. The medicine you found wasn't fake, she really was diabetic. I'm guessing she'd lost out on things all her life because of it, and didn't want to risk losing her chance to work with us. So she camouflaged it with tattoos. And fit right in. The boost you gave those bottles was probably the first fix she ever had. It killed her. And the baby she was carrying. My baby, Doc."

"But sweet Jesus, Stoney, I didn't know. It wasn't my fault. You know me. Dr. Feelgood. I get people up or down sometimes, but nothin' heavy. I'd never hurt anybody on purpose, you know that."

And he believed it. Bonnie was dead. And our child with her. And my life was a ghost show. Elvis and Jimi and me. We'd all died the same way. And Doc really believed that he hadn't hurt anyone. Dr. Feelgood. Dr. Death.

He was already spinning halfway across the room before I realized I'd hit him. He slammed into the wall and crumpled to the floor. I snatched up the chair from the dressing table. Doc looked up at me, dazed, cowering. He was crying and his nose was bleeding. And I couldn't hit him. Hell, he was right. In a way I was as guilty as he was. But I had to hit something.

I pitched the chair through the window, exploding the glass out on the street. And then I walked out. And I didn't look back.

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* * *

I was packing. Len rapped once on my open door. "The cops busted Doc," he said, glancing around. "There was some trouble in his room and hotel security called the law. They caught him holding a couple grand worth of goodies." He paused, waiting for me to react. I zipped my shaving kit closed.

"Cop said his bail will be at least ten large. You got that kind of money?"

I shook my head.

"If you want an advance, maybe we can work a deal. Say a contract extension? At a slight pay cut?"

"No," I said. "I'm out."

"Out? You mean you're leaving? What about Doc?"

"He's on his own."

"Then what about the show? We've got contracts."

"Hire another ghost. Any street bum can play me in the shape I'm in now."

"What's wrong with you? What the hell's happened?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

"All right," Len said slowly. "Go on ahead. Maybe some time off the road will do you good. But remember, when you get ready to work again, you still owe me six months."

"I won't have to remember, Len," I said. "You will."

His beeper went off. "Duty calls. See ya, Stoney," he said, and trotted off to find a phone. I didn't even look up.

When I did, Carol was there, watching. She looked a little shaky, but better than she had earlier. She was pale, dressed in patterned jeans and a peasant blouse. Her left hand was wrapped in a clean gauze bandage. "Len says you're leaving," she said.

"I'm going home. To Indiana. Hang out at my grandaddy's farm awhile. He can use the help. So can I."

She smiled. "Sounds dull."

"I hope so," I said.

"Are you coming back?"

"Not to this show, no. I may have flushed my talent, I don't know. But I'm not a ghost yet. At least I hope I'm not."

"You look real enough to me. This farm you're talking about, does the house have a porch?"

"A porch?" I frowned, thinking. "It used to have. I haven't been there in a while. Why?"

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"The show has a break scheduled in a few months. Maybe I can pop out to wherever it is. And we can sit on the porch, maybe sing a few songs. You've never heard me sing, you know. I mean, in my own voice. I'm pretty good."

"I'll bet you are," I said. "I'll let you know. I don't know if I'm going to be singing anymore."

"You will," she said positively. "Anybody who's survived the life you've been in can get through anything. Would you like a copy of that video? The one with the song on it?"

"No," I said. "I'm not likely to forget it. Thanks anyway."

"No charge," she said, straightening. "Well, have a safe trip."

"Hey, Anspach," I said. "There is one thing you can do for me, if you wouldn't mind."

"I guess I owe you one. What is it?"

"This may sound kind of odd to you, but . . . You see, we never had the chance to say goodbye. Bonnie and me. Could you . . . say goodbye to me? In her voice, I mean."

She stared at me for what seemed a very long time. Her dark eyes were a mystery. I thought she was going to run a game on me one last time. But she didn't.

"No," she said at last. "I guess not. I'll see you, Stoney. Good luck." And then she was gone.

I finished packing the last of my things, snapped the case shut, and carried it to the door. I glanced around to make sure I hadn't missed anything. The room was neat, anonymous. The bed was still made. Like no one had been there at all. Not even a ghost.

"Goodbye, Bonnie," I said.

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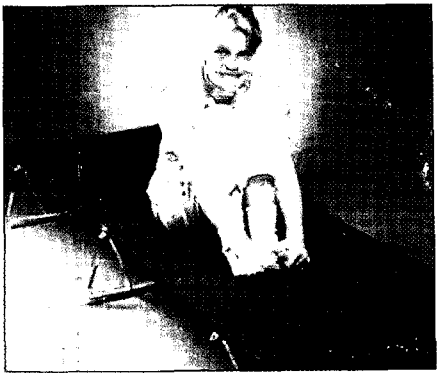

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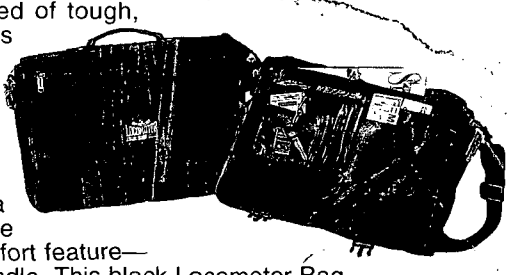

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